The Reckoning

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The Reckoning

by Damonfreak89

Summary

Season 2 of my re-write of Hannibal. Will Graham, now the bonded Omega of Alpha Hannibal Lecter, stands trial for the murders of 5 people, including surrogate daughter, Abigail Hobbs. However, having recovered sufficient memories of Hannibal's manipulation during his pre-heat prodromes, Will is determined to prove his Alpha's guilt, but his actions take him down a dark path, one that he might not survive.

Chapter Summary:

It’s the beginning of the end for Hannibal in Baltimore. As a result of Alana’s complaint against him, Jack is under investigation at the FBI for misconduct regarding his handling of Will, an unlawfully employed Omega. Hannibal is a suspect in the Copycat Murders because Will, incarcerated at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, insists that he committed them.
Meanwhile, the discovery of six partially preserved Omega bodies shocks the bureau, and Hannibal is asked to walk in Will’s shoes to help find the killer. At the BSHCI, Will asks Alana for help in recovering prodromal memories through hypnosis, and he has a flashback to Hannibal forcing Abigail’s ear down his throat.

Kaiseki

ONE

Kaiseki

Rutting Alphas stink of musk. Bitter and cloying, it is a heavy odor that settles like dust on every surface it touches.

Jack Crawford reeks of rut, no matter how much he may try to hide it. His burgundy eyes are bloodshot and there is a light sheen of sweat on his forehead. Body temperature typically rises by five to ten degrees during a rut, fueled by a rapidly pumping heart. Blood vessels widen, allowing for a more economic consumption of oxygen to power muscles and give both speed and strength to the Alpha.

Hannibal knows this, and he is counting on it. After all, it is how he intends to kill Agent Crawford.

He glances up when Jack enters the kitchen, still sliding his knife through the marbled flesh beneath him, carving perfect steak medallions for dinner. Jack's heavy footfalls are calculated. Precise. He holds himself taut as a bowstring, ready to fight.

It is a challenge, as clear as any howl, and Hannibal can feel each subtle shift of response within his own body; the flare of his nostrils and the way his lips part a fraction, gathering Jack's scent onto the glands in the roof of his mouth… He tastes strong, an Alpha in his prime… But he is angry, oh, so *very* angry, and emotion saps intelligence.

Hannibal's mouth curves into a tiny, satisfied smile. He is, after all, greeting a friend. Greeting, and bidding farewell, for they cannot both leave this room alive.

He brings the bowl of salad closer. Places his knife over it, ready to grab the moment he needs it. Jack comes ever closer, a circling shark, but he is not the predator here. Not truly.

Time slows, and tension crackles like lightning. An eternity suspended in the blink of an eye…

Jack moves first. He reaches for his gun, slipping his hand beneath his suit jacket, for the gun holstered at his chest. Hannibal is fast, far faster than anyone knows, and he throws the knife with deadly accuracy. Over and over it turns, razor edge whistling through the still air, an opening note to the patter of rain just started outside. And then it lands, right on target, spearing through the flesh and muscle and bone of Jack's hand, knocking the gun from suddenly limp fingers.

And Hannibal, never one to waste an opportunity, vaults the counter with all his Alpha grace, launching himself at Jack even as the other man rips the knife from his hand to use as a

weapon.

Jack slashes at Hannibal, and Hannibal feints, dodging the blade. Jack swings again, big and clumsy with the shock of the attack, and Hannibal ducks. He brings his arms up to defend himself, fists before his face, and blocks Jack's next attack, striking at his elbow to make Jack drop the knife with a clatter. The *strength* of the larger Alpha surprises him, though, and Hannibal hears a gasping grunt escape him as bloodied fists pummel him. He manages to kick Jack's gun away and it skids across the floor, lost beneath the refrigerator.

But Jack has him in a grip now, and Hannibal's feet kick air as the other Alpha gets a shoulder up against to his chest, swinging him round in a full body tackle. There's a moment of sickening freefall and then Hannibal's shoulders smash into the glass of the cupboard above the sink. He collapses, letting his muscles relax to lessen the injuries, and Jack grabs him again.

Jack gets in two sharp jabs to Hannibal's gut, sending bright pain scorching through his abdomen, and then Hannibal punches him, the shock reverberating up through his arm. Jack shoves him and Hannibal sprawls on his back over the island, scattering ingredients and utensils in his wake.

He grabs a saucepan, and whacks Jack over the head with it, but the momentum carries him forward and Jack recovers fast. Jack grabs Hannibal by the shoulders and swings him round again, ferocious in his rage. And Jack, baring bloody teeth in a snarl, *throws* him into the stainless steel door of the refrigerator hard enough to dent it.

Hannibal collapses, his lungs too small behind aching ribs, his legs weak from the assault.

Fuck… I can't let Jack win…

He looks up, wary now. His eyes are bright red, the iris color lending itself to enhanced vision. He can see the particles of scent in the air, swarming like flies, and he wants to scatter them. Can see the throb of Jack's pulse in his throat and temple, and he wants to *sever* it.

Jack stalks towards him, and Hannibal gets his feet under him, braced for another flurry of blows. He takes them, getting in the odd hit between the battering. But the big hand over his throat, choking him and pinning him up against the cupboard, is a concern. Hannibal hears himself hiss, going beyond mere Alpha growls to something even more primal. He hits out at Jack, whacking his rigid hand into the bigger man's spleen, then his kidney, and Jack is forced to release him as he staggers. But he doesn't fully let go of Hannibal, and drags him around with him so that Hannibal's back is up against Jack's chest, caught in a headlock.

Hannibal slams Jack back against the cupboard but Jack holds on, and, with a yell, uses the forward momentum to pin Hannibal face-first over the counter. Hannibal scrabbles for a knife from the block, but Jack tears him away before he can gain purchase on a handle. Instead, Hannibal uses the swinging motion to wrench Jack off-balance, and then reaches behind him for the pepper grinder. It is a heavy thing, and he hits Jack in the temple with it as hard as he can. Two, three times, until Jack stumbles away, dazed and bleeding.

Jack bends, and for a brief, shining moment, Hannibal's heart soars with the hope that he's won. It is dashed, however, when Jack scoops up the knife Hannibal had thrown into his hand, the blade slick with blood. Jack holds it in his left hand, his right still dripping from the gash. Hannibal grabs his apron and tightens it to simulate nunchaku, advancing before Jack has time to catch his breath.

He feints twice, dodging the fencing blows, and wraps the apron up around Jack's elbow. Knocks the knife away and delivers a sharp kick to Jack's stomach, sending him crashing to the ground. Bloody saliva dribbles from Jack's mouth and the sour odor of fear-sweat rises from him as he crawls towards the cupboard, reaching for the handle to haul himself to his feet.

Hannibal pounces, spotting an opportunity. He grabs the freezer door and yanks it open, smashing the steel right into Jack's face. Jack collapses onto his side, coughing in pain.

The victory is fleeting. Jack is a seasoned fighter, and an Alpha in full rut is one of the most dangerous creatures on the planet. He rises to his feet again, veins standing proud beneath his sweaty skin. He undoes his tie and winds it around his hand, stemming the blood. Hannibal pulls two carving knives from his block and turns to face him.

I'm going to kill you, Jack.

Jack punches, moving like a professional kickboxer. He's had some training in this, but Hannibal is faster. He gets up underneath the swing and flips Jack around, pinning him on his back on the counter and then stabbing with the knife. Jack's eyes widen, and he reacts on pure instinct, grabbing the first thing to hand to shield his face. And effective barrier; Hannibal sinks his knife through the bamboo chopping board, his muscles shaking as he tries to overcome Jack's strength and spear him through the eye.

And then Jack twists, and shoves Hannibal away with such force that he slips in the blood smeared across the floor.

No!

Hannibal struggles to get up but Jack is already on him. He grabs Hannibal in another headlock, blowing hard like a bull elephant before he *roars* and flips Hannibal up and over his head, smashing him face first into the shattered remains of the glass salad bowl on the ground. And Hannibal, dizzy from the world tilting, glass embedded in his elbow and a tooth wobbling in his jaw, can't summon the strength to do *anything* to defend himself.

Jack winds his fist in Hannibal's hair, jerking his head back just so that he can punch him across the face, splitting his cheek across the bone and sending the loose tooth spinning away to join the gun beneath the refrigerator. Hannibal snarls, but his arms are too heavy to respond adequately, and he feels a shiver of cold panic when he feels the silk of Jack's tie loop around his neck to garrote him. He has only a second to bring one finger up, and pain shoots through his knuckle as he chokes and grunts, draped across Jack's back like a carcass with his feet dangling.

Jack roars again, straining with all his might to crush Hannibal's windpipe. He pulls down, as hard as he possibly can, until he feels the other man sag. Only when Hannibal's arm falls, limp, at his side, does he trust that he has done enough to make him lose consciousness.

When Jack lowers him, Hannibal remains still for a moment longer. Jack is panting hard, fetid breath blowing over his ear. The tie is still dangerously tight around his neck, and Hannibal moves his hand slowly, feeling for a suitably large piece of glass. The moment his fingers close on one, he strikes, plunging the shard deep into Jack's neck.

Jack's scream is little more than a hoarse gasp. He stumbles backwards, rut replaced by terror in an instant. Blood spurts from his neck, pouring over his fingers as he reaches for the wound. He makes a choked little sound as he falls into the pantry, seeking refuge, and Hannibal allows himself a smile.

That could almost have been considered a *whimper*.

But Jack isn't dead yet, which means he is still a threat. Hannibal collects his knives, working the cramp from his fingers. He takes a step back, gathers his strength, and then throws himself at the pantry door.

Ready or not, Jack, here I come.

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TWELVE WEEKS EARLIER

Schubert's *No. 3* in B flat major is a soothing accompaniment to his dinner preparation, and Hannibal takes great care to hear every note of music as sinks his knife through the pale flesh before him. He folds the fine slivers of meat with surgical precision before arranging them, three-a-piece, in the seat of the decorative shell inlaid with fresh water clam and squid. Hot water over a slice of lemon adds a tartness to the sea urchin, whilst helping them retain their shape, and Hannibal places them in a tall dish of soy sauce before placing each plate over ice to carry through to his guest.

Jack Crawford looks up from a pensive stare when Hannibal returns to the dining room. He sits back, eager eyes on the plates in his fellow Alpha's hands as Hannibal approaches.

'This course is called "mukozuke",' Hannibal explains, setting the dish down before Jack. 'Seasonal sashimi, sea urchin, water clam and squid.'

'What a *beautiful* presentation, Doctor,' Jack says, smiling at Hannibal before unfolding his napkin again.

'"Kaiseki",' Hannibal explains, striding to the bureau to fetch the bottle of chilled wine and giving Jack's shoulder a friendly squeeze on his way past. 'A Japanese art form that honors the taste and aesthetic of what we eat.'

‘Well, I *almost* feel guilty about eating it,’ Jack chuckles, already wielding his chopsticks and dunking the sashimi into the sea urchin sauce, grinning at Hannibal when the other Alpha pours him a glass of wine.

‘I never feel guilty eating *anything*,’ Hannibal purrs, allowing his eyes to flicker red for just a moment at the truth of that statement.

The sashimi melts onto his tongue, filling Jack’s mouth with flavor, and he closes his eyes in satisfaction.

‘*Mmm*. I can’t quite place the fish,’ he says, pointing to Hannibal for help.

‘He was a flounder,’ Hannibal replies, unbuttoning his cream suit jacket before taking his seat across from Jack. *And my, how he did gasp and flop…*

Jack takes a swig of wine, a quiet moan caught in his throat, and he raises an eyebrow at how *good* it all tastes.

‘I last prepared this meal for my Aunt Murasaki,’ Hannibal says, gathering the delicate flesh between his chopsticks. ‘Under similarly unfortunate circumstances.’

‘Oh, well, what circumstances were those?’ Jack asks, as bullish and insensitive as ever. Hannibal suppresses his flicker of irritation, and merely replies,

‘A loss.’ He dabbles sashimi into his soy sauce, making no effort to elaborate. His private life is none of Jack’s concern. At the other Alpha’s quizzical frown, barely hidden behind an attempt at polite curiosity, Hannibal decides to move the conversation along. ‘This is a loss,’ he explains. ‘Will is a loss, and we’re mourning a death.’

Death of who he once was… The sweet-natured, trusting boy who ran from every dark desire inside his wicked little mind. Physical death, too, if he is convicted of those murders. Euthanasia for an unstable Omega… He would be the second in the country since 1963.

‘Will’s death is on *me*, not *you*,’ Jack growls. ‘I put him out there before you bonded him.’

‘It’s on both of us,’ Hannibal says, sliding the sashimi onto his tongue to savor its freshness. Caught this morning, and chilled to perfection.

‘I can’t stop thinking that Will may be convicted of *five* murders, while I am only maybe convicted of one.’

‘Well, you’re not on trial,’ Hannibal reasons, watching as Jack eats his squid and gives him a dry look from under heavy eyebrows.

‘I *will* be,’ the other Alpha replies. ‘In the halls of the FBI. And so will you. I mean, according to Will Graham, this was all you.’

Hannibal sighs, and refreshes the sauce on his next piece of meat.

‘Will was your bloodhound; you can’t ignore where he points,’ he says.

‘I’m *not* ignoring it,’ Jack says, though there’s a desperation that makes his voice crack. Hannibal keeps his mask firmly in place, despite the urge to purr and grin at this dangerous game of cat and mouse.

‘You have to investigate me,’ he continues. ‘It’s in my best interest, and yours.’

‘Yes, it is,’ Jack agrees, and they smile at each other for a moment before Jack adds, ‘But, I also can’t ignore the fact that my bloodhound went *mad*… *before* he pointed in your direction.’

Terribly convenient for me, Hannibal muses, repressing a red eye prickle.

‘We can’t define Will only by his maddest edges,’ he says, playing the role of devoted, love-blind Alpha mate. Jack, predictably, grimaces at this, and the burgundy ring around his own irises flares crimson as his emotions, once again, get the better of him.

‘We can’t *define* Will… *at all*.’

Hannibal sighs delicately.

‘I can only hope his incarceration helps him… Whatever happens.’

***

The river runs fast and wide. Cool water streams between his legs, shifting the pebbles beneath his feet.

Will loves this time of year. The sun is low in the sky, casting a golden glow over the misty air, and with many birds already migrated for the winter, those that remain allow the wilderness to breathe between their chirruping calls.

The fly-line whistles each time he flicks his wrist back, using the swirling wind to catch the lure and send it as far into the current as he can. Will’s father taught him to fish when he was a young boy, and Bill Graham had been an excellent tutor. Will is wearing his vest and cap, the old seams re-stitched a dozen times, pockets still harboring secrets from his New Orleans childhood.

A heavy snort from the riverbank catches his attention and Will looks over to see his raven stag, its hot breath billowing in the morning air. His heart stumbles in his chest and heat spreads through his body, making his fingers tingle. It’s *so* beautiful… He hasn’t seen it for days.

Sunlight plays with the feathers on the beast’s neck, catching the oil-slick darkness and transforming it into an array of colors. Will’s gut aches with the urge to leave the river and curl up with him, to slide his fingers through silky fur and be comforted.

The stag snorts again, lowering its antlered head, regarding Will with cunning, obsidian eyes. It is waiting to see what he will do next.

I miss you…

Sat alone in a steel cage in the visitor's room at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Will Graham slowly returns from the depths of his mind, becoming aware of his body and surroundings once again. The scratch of rough cotton across his crest is a constant irritation. The stale smell of old urine and bleach hangs in the recycled air and the faint sound of screaming inmates raises the fine hairs on his arms.

Dr Frederick Chilton sits on a folding chair precisely five feet away from Will's cage. Will has no idea how long the Alpha has been there, in his sharp black suit, Armani shirt and silk tie with white-gold pin. Frederick has healed remarkably well following Dr Gideon's attack on him; no-one would ever guess he was missing organs and had his abdomen disfigured by three gruesome smiles. His obtrusive scent is worsened only by his overpowering cologne, the sort of smell that wears the man, and Will can feel his lips itching to pull back from his teeth in a warning snarl.

Stay away from me.

Will realizes Frederick is talking. He has no idea how long that's been going on for, either. The Alpha has a clipboard with papers on his lap and is gesturing with his silver pen, though at the ceiling or in Will's general direction, he can't tell. He sighs.

'What did you say?'

Dr Chilton regards the Omega in the cage before him, a flash of irritation crossing his face.

'I said, how does that make you feel?' he repeats.

Confused, since I have no context to the question, Will thinks. But he *really* can't be bothered to listen to Frederick repeat the whole thing; standard psychoanalysis bullshit and graphic descriptions of the murders he's been accused of. He knows the drill and he's already tired of it.

He sighs again, and rolls his shoulders in a futile attempt to loosen his aching chest. The muscles are tender from his gunshot wound, radiating out until both pectorals feel swollen. Dr Chilton's cologne is making him feel sick, and Will does nothing to hide his irritation as he replies,

'It makes me *feel* like I'm sitting in a dunking tank and you're lobbing softballs, hoping to make a *splash*.' He grimaces at the Alpha, feeling his eyes pulse gold as his frustration gets the better of him. 'But you keep missing the target.'

Chilton smiles, his dark eyes gleaming at the insult and the challenge.

'Fortunately, I have time for a few more lobs,' he says. 'You *are* in *my* hospital.' His eyes warm, maroon now, and his voice lowers to what is an unmistakable *purr* as he adds, 'You're my patient now, Will.'

Nausea crawls through Will's belly, slicing its way up his spine to settle like a razor on the back of his neck. He fights the urge to cringe, or snarl, and clenches his jaw hard enough for his ears to ring as he shakes his head.

‘I’m not talking to you, Frederick,’ he manages. He takes another deep breath, waiting for his stomach to settle, and when he speaks again, his voice is deep and steady. ‘I wanna talk to Dr Lecter.’

He closes his eyes and retreats back into his mind, back to the river, before he has to listen to anything else. The stench of foreign Alphas and Frederick’s offensive cologne fades from his nose, and Will is once again surrounded by nature. Cool water pushing against his legs, fresh, winter air and damp spray on his face, and the steady breathing of his stag as it waits for him on the riverbank.

I miss my Alpha.

From the depths of the river, a demon rises. Skeletal and black, its leathery skin shrunken over every bone in its emaciated form. Blank, staring white eyes in a hollow face, watching him from beneath a pair of razor-sharp antlers rising like a crown…

Will’s heart begins to pound, and he releases the fishing line to press a hand to the butterflies in his stomach. He can’t tell if he’s nervous or excited. He just knows he needs to see him. To touch him again. To breathe deep his scent before… whatever comes next.

I’m waiting for you. My monster. My Alpha. Come find me.

***

Kade Prurnell still wears the same perfume that her mother bought for her when she first presented as an Alpha, more than thirty years ago. She wears her blonde hair cut short to accentuate her long neck and sharp jaw, and she favors the diamond hoop earrings given to her as a ten-year anniversary by her Omegan mate. Whispered behind closed doors, she is referred to as a shark because wherever she goes, bloodshed inevitably follows, with careers torn to shreds.

Now, sat at Jack Crawford’s conference table, Kade taps the heavy lid of her fountain pen on the confidential file before her, considering the memorized evidence inside before raising sharp blue eyes to the Beta and fellow Alpha sat opposite her.

‘According to Dr Bloom, you were *warned* against putting something like Will Graham, with his *issues*, into the field,’ she says. A baited hook, dangling in the water.

At the casual insult, some*thing* rather than some*one*, Jack and Alana share a raised eyebrow. Despite being pitted against each other in terms of the complaint the Beta filed against him, they both stand by the liberal belief that Omegas should have the same rights as everyone else. A belief that, clearly, is not shared by Ms. Prurnell.

It may not have been posed as a question, but Jack has sat through enough of these internal investigations to know he should answer it as such.

‘Yes,’ he says heavily, glancing at Alana again. Now is not the time to argue Omegan rights. ‘That’s correct.’

‘Were you *aware* that Dr Bloom would be *filing* this report?’ Kade asks, her expression growing more incredulous when Jack replies,

‘Yes; she told me what she was going to do.’

‘Did you advise her *against* it?’

Alana frowns at Kade’s question; Jack’s *advice* would hardly be objective, and her cheeks warm at the insinuation that she, as a Beta, should have asked for *permission* before submitting the complaint.

Jack merely shrugs.

‘I told her she should do whatever she felt was necessary,’ he says. ‘Evidently, *she* felt it *was* necessary to file the report.’

‘These are allegations of *misconduct*,’ Kade explains, her voice deceptively soft even as her eyes shine blue fire. ‘It’s *damning* stuff, Jack.’

Jack nods heavily, his eyes downcast, but Alana speaks up.

‘I never stated anywhere that this was misconduct,’ she says, frowning at Kade again. Her heart beats a little faster, and she feels the jersey of her red dress stick to her back. ‘In my *opinion*, it was a lapse in judgment.’

‘A lapse in judgment *is* misconduct,’ Kade replies, spearing her with her gaze before turning back to Jack. ‘There’ll be an internal investigation,’ she adds.

Alana glances at Jack, who has his knuckles up near his mouth and his shoulders hunched in weary defeat as he nods again. She’s never seen him look so *tired*, but Will is in a *mental institution* facing the possibility, the *probability* of a *death* sentence because of them. They *all* failed him, and they need to take responsibility for that.

‘There *should* be,’ she says quietly, flinching when Kade’s eyes flash red and she drops her pen with a huff.

Sitting back, the female Alpha looks down her nose at the Agent and Consultant across from her.

‘A federal examiner is someone who arrives at a battlefield *after* the battle, and *bayonets* the wounded,’ she says, speaking very slowly and clearly so that there can be no mistaking her explanation. She looks at Alana, her upper lip curling. ‘You have *wounded* Agent Crawford. Who do you think is gonna be getting the bayonet?’

Alana bites her tongue, tension thrumming within her body as her instincts battle. On the one hand, she should submit, to relent and appease the two Alphas in the room. On the other hand, she was never one to quit, and her father always said she should have presented as an Alpha.

Frustrated by the lack of response from the Beta, Kade leans forwards again, trying a different approach.

‘There is a general desire to see this go away *quickly* and *quietly*,’ she says, lowering her voice in an attempt to appeal to Alana’s sympathy. ‘In light of that, Dr Bloom, I would *greatly* appreciate it if you would recant your report.’

What? You heartless, career-blind bitch!

‘No!’ Alana snaps, twin spots of color flaring on her cheeks. ‘Will Graham’s *life* has been *destroyed!* How that happened *has* to be a matter of record!’

Kade sighs, and looks at Jack. Alana blushes, realizing just *how* much she’s thrown her colleague under the proverbial bus, and she glances at him.

‘I’m sorry, Jack.’

Kade picks up her pen, resuming her tapping as she frowns at Jack. Her expression says that she clearly finds him wanting as an Alpha, especially when dealing with a *Beta*.

Jack shrugs, and offers Kade a helpless grimace.

‘Dr Bloom is not easily swayed,’ he says. Alana clenches her jaw and looks away, refusing to look at either of them. *Fucking Alphas*.

‘This is going to get ugly,’ Kade warns, but Jack simply clasps his hands before him and shrugs again.

‘It already has.’

***

There’s one section of Rock Creek, in Rockville, Maryland, that *always* gets clogged up, so on Tuesday morning, when park attendants Bock and Coop a call asking them to sort it out, it’s just another day.

They haul on their waders, grab sticks to help them balance and push against the current upstream to the overspill.

‘Was there a storm?’ Coop asks, frowning at the debris churned up around the base of the waterfall.

‘Nah, it looks like someone’s blasting beaver dams again,’ Bock replies, and Coop groans.

‘Aw, man…’ That means he’ll have to file a report, and he’s not so good with the writing.

Bock wades ever deeper into the creek, poking at the bottom of the stream with his stick to dislodge all the crap.

‘Smells real bad down here!’ he shouts, looking over his shoulder at Coop.

‘Probably dead beavers!’ Coop replies, and Bock stabs even harder at the soggy, squishy mess under his stick.

Come on you son-of-a-bitch…

Something gives, and suddenly it’s a nightmare. A dead body, bloated and discolored from so long in the water, rushes up to break the foaming surface. Bock throws his stick away and scrambles backwards, panic clawing at his throat. His foot slips on an algae-slick rock and he twists, grabbing at more debris.

‘Oh, *shit*, oh, *shit!*’

Another body floats up, disturbed from its resting place by the swirling water. Bock screams and this time he goes under, flailing hands grabbing at a body but falling as a great chunk of rotting flesh falls off the thing’s *face*.

‘Bock!’ Coop jumps forwards, his heart racing and sweat dripping from his armpits. What the…? Is this even real? Are those…? That’s not a beaver dam…

Bock resurfaces, spluttering and retching, surrounded by corpses.

‘Get me *out* of here!’ he screams, struggling against his waterlogged waders. Coop reaches for him as soon as he can, and helps Bock to his feet before they both turn and run upstream.

‘Let’s go!’

This is bad… *Real* bad, and Coop knows, this time, he’ll have to do more than just file a report.

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Hannibal waits until the precise moment that Bedelia Du Maurier’s clock reaches eleven, and then he speaks.

‘Will Graham has asked to see me,’ he says, loosening his suit jacket as he takes his designated chair for his one-hour therapy session. He crosses a long leg over the other and clasps his hands on his knee, regarding the blonde Alpha across from him. ‘I would like to see him.’

Bedelia remains quiet for a moment, and Hannibal interprets her silence as a question. He must explain himself. His thoughts. His actions.

‘I continue to be curious about the way he thinks,’ he says. ‘Despite all that’s happened.’

Bedelia considers Hannibal for a moment. Dr Lecter is a man of great depths, like a vast ocean hidden behind shining obsidian eyes. She sees the occasional glimpse of the monsters swimming in those depths, like ancient leviathans waiting to devour mankind. But Hannibal only chooses to show her the safer, shallower waters. She wonders if he is aware of just how deep his feeling for Will Graham goes… His rationale for wanting to see his mate is… *shallow*. A half-truth, even to himself.

‘He’s still influencing you,’ she says softly, and she notes the way Hannibal’s eyes tighten at the suggestion that he, master of control, might be subject to external influence. It unsettles him. Bedelia knows well enough to offer him a modicum of safety, for her sake, so she adds, ‘Will Graham asking to see you betrays his clear intent to manipulate you.’

‘And if I agree to see Will?’ Hannibal asks, observing Bedelia’s fluctuating heartbeat and the faint aroma of fear adding a saltiness to her scent. It has been growing stronger ever since Will was arrested.

For someone so adept at seeing others, Bedelia notes that Hannibal often has an incredible lack of self-awareness.

‘It betrays *your* clear intent to manipulate *him*,’ she replies.

What she does not add is that it also betrays Hannibal’s clear concern for Will, his protectiveness as an Alpha and his obsessiveness as a lover… Not an altogether *flattering* combination, and something that could easily be Hannibal’s undoing.

Hannibal contemplates Bedelia’s words, and, for the briefest of moments, his mask slips, revealing a maelstrom of emotion quickly suppressed.

‘I miss him.’

Bedelia holds her face very still, careful not to let her shock show. Hannibal is not ready to truly know himself, or his connection to his Omega.

‘You are *obsessed* with Will Graham,’ she says gently. True to form, Hannibal looks puzzled, and feels the need to contradict her.

‘I’m intrigued.’

‘*Obsessively*.’ As Hannibal sighs, ready to argue again, Bedelia continues, ‘And he will take advantage of that.’

Hannibal looks, for just a second, utterly lost. His armor of a dark suit, silk tie and cornflower blue shirt do nothing to protect him here; Bedelia can see past it all, to the hollow *loneliness* eating away at him inside.

‘Will is my mate,’ Hannibal says. Spotting an opening, Bedelia nods.

‘Why?’ she asks, sliding her question behind his shields to prize them away from the truth. ‘Why did you choose him as your mate?’

Hannibal’s dark gaze grows warm and fond, distant as he recalls his first therapy session with Will.

‘He sees his own mentality as grotesque but useful,’ he replies. ‘Like a chair of antlers. He can’t repress who he is. There’s an honesty in that I admire.’

You see his darkness, and you admire it.

Bedelia hums acknowledgement.

‘I imagine there’s an honesty in that you can relate to,’ she suggests. Another tug, pulling the armor away to lay bare to the world what lies beneath. ‘What can’t *you* repress, Hannibal?’

With startling clarity, Hannibal realizes what Bedelia is doing. She is curious; she wants to see the predator her instincts tell her is in the room. Very well.

He stares at her, shedding each layer of falsehood until her adrenaline spikes, and smiling when it does.

She spooks quickly, and far more easily than Will.

I chose him as my mate because he is my only equal in this world. He is the only one who can truly understand me.

That afternoon, he makes an appointment to visit his Omega at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

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Will can still remember his first therapy session with Hannibal. They get progressively fuzzier as his condition worsened, but that first meeting is *crystal* clear, and, as he sits on his lumpy cot mattress, waiting for his Alpha to arrive, he sinks into that memory.

7.30pm. Thursday. Sitting in the waiting room, nerves buzzing in his mind like flies… Will jumps to his feet when he hears the click of the door handle turning, his heart racing and palms sweating.

Here we go…

Dr Lecter appears in the doorway, sandy hair swept neatly to the side but falling over his forehead at the end of a long day, perhaps tousled from running his fingers through it in frustration. Will quickly discards this theory because Hannibal Lecter doesn’t strike him as the sort of man who *ever* feels frustrated, and certainly not enough to physically *show* it. The other man is impeccably dressed, wearing a gray plaid suit, an expensive wool and silk blend only found in designer stores or tailors, bronze silk tie and a cornflower blue shirt that brings out the glow of his vibrant skin.

He looks every inch an Alpha in his prime, healthy and strong.

‘Good evening, Will.’ When Hannibal speaks, his voice is deep and rich, each word caressed by his accent before released into the air. He sounds genuinely pleased to see him, and Will suppresses a snort.

Shrinks are good liars.

Hannibal steps back, extending his arm in welcome.

‘Please. Come in.’

With the same dread he imagines a condemned man might feel approaching the gallows, Will walks past Dr Lecter and into the room. His senses are in overdrive, and the snap of the door shutting behind him is as loud as a gunshot.

There's no escaping, now.

The office is exactly as Will expects; all dark wood paneling and a high ceiling, tall windows flanked by long curtains and a grand fireplace dominating the far wall. The floor is buffed to a high shine, an ocean of grey wood circling thick rugs. Hannibal's desk rises from the center of the room, pristinely neat and unmarred by sentimental clutter. There is a simple brass lamp, books, tissues and a clock. All functional; useful. Earning their place in Hannibal's presence. It is an enticing combination of old-world elegance and modern minimalism. Masculine and powerful. Each item makes a statement, suffusing the atmosphere with the certainty that, in this arena, Hannibal is king.

'Shall I take your coat?' Hannibal asks, prowling around him. Will hunches his shoulders and shoves his hands into his trouser pockets.

'I'll keep it on,' he snaps. He's bordering on rude, but he doesn't care. Hannibal is staring at him with such fierce intensity; Will needs as many layers and as much distance as possible.

He begins to pace, intent on examining every corner of the room. If it happens to put a considerable distance between them, that's just a bonus. He can smell himself; even doused in Beta spray as he is, he can taste the sweetness of his Omega musk creeping through. He wonders how gold his eyes are.

'Have you been practicing long?' he asks, looking down at the stereotypical therapist's couch sat in the middle of a Persian rug and hoping Hannibal doesn't expect him to lie down on it because that is *never* going to happen. Dr Lecter will be lucky if Will consents to sitting in the leather armchair across from him.

'I made the change from Emergency Room surgeon to psychiatrist a little over ten years ago,' Hannibal replies, flanking Will on the other side of the armchairs. 'How long have you worked for the FBI?'

'Got a teaching job when I left Homicide,' Will replies, staring up at all the bookshelves lining the walls of the gallery library.

The silence is charged between them, thick with tension, and he can't help but pause when he reaches a pale blue silk couch up against the crimson wall. Glances back over his shoulder to find Hannibal waiting for a proper answer to his question, and sighs.

'Nearly six. Can I go up?' He gestures to the ladder, and Hannibal inclines his head, gracious as ever.

'Of course.'

Will climbs the rungs in silence. The lighting in Hannibal's office is muted, lending the room an air of confidentiality. An illusion of privacy. Will can see the spines of hundreds of books,

many in foreign languages, and he can't resist the urge to trace the gilded letters marking a first edition of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams.*

Has Hannibal read all of these?

It wouldn't surprise him to find that he had. The Alpha strikes Will as someone hungry for everything life has to offer; knowledge, art, food…

A true hedonist.

He shifts, his back half-turned to Hannibal as he returns his hands to his pockets, closing one fist around his can of Beta spray. He knows he's lurking, hiding from Hannibal, but he can't help it. Everything about this room is as elegant and sophisticated as the man himself, and Will feels despicably shabby with his uncombed hair, coffee stain on the thigh of his cream cotton pants and plaid shirt shedding dog hairs with every step.

He knows why he's struggling. He hasn't seen Hannibal for days. Not since they had been together in Abigail's hospital room, directly after Garrett slit her throat. He had woken with a start in the afternoon, flushing when he realized his head had tipped back and he must have been snoring. He remembered the feeling of Hannibal's soft wool coat draped over him, acting as a blanket to ward off the chill of the room, but there was no sign of Hannibal himself. The monitors around Abigail had continued to beep, gently lulling Will back into a fitful doze, and when he'd stirred again in the evening, both Hannibal and his coat had gone...

A rustle catches his attention and he looks down. Sees Hannibal approach, his head tilted back to watch him, a piece of paper in his slim, elegant hands. Despite himself, he can't help but feel a flicker of curiosity.

'What's that?' he asks, and Hannibal glances down at it when he replies.

'Your psychological evaluation. You are totally functional, and more or less sane.' He grins. 'Well done.'

Despite his unease, Will's chest swoops. He frowns, moving closer to the gallery railing.

'Did you just… rubber stamp me?' he asks.

What the hell is going on? I thought I was here for an evaluation? He's done it already? Is this a joke?

'Yes,' Hannibal says. 'Jack Crawford may lay his weary head to rest knowing he didn't break you, and our conversation can proceed unobstructed by paperwork.'

Will fights a snort and starts to walk. Hannibal is the most unconventional man he's ever met. He only ever plays by his own rules. For some reason, the fact that he has already got the necessities out of the way is… comforting. And yet Will's stomach writhes with nerves, because what is he supposed to talk about if not a psych eval?

His neck tingles, a warm buzz on his nape, and he's suddenly glad of the distance between them because he can *smell* the first hint of sugary slick rising from between his legs.

Fuck.

He needs a distraction.

'*Jack* thinks that I need therapy,' he drawls, allowing some of his anger to add a bite to the words. He's still angry about Jack's underhanded way of getting him here. Using his dominant scent to bully him into agreeing to this. He *hates* that he's so powerless against him.

'What you *need* is a way out of dark places when Jack sends you there,' Hannibal replies, and Will all but rolls his eyes.

Dark places… Garrett Jacob Hobbs's mind is so much more dangerous than a simple 'dark place'. It's a mire, a spiderweb and I'm not entirely sure I'm not still trapped in it. Maybe this is all an illusion?

'Last time he sent me into a dark place, I brought something back,' he snaps. He scuffs his boot on the carpet, his mind drifting away from the office, across the city and into Abigail's hospital room. Hannibal's voice grounds him again.

'A surrogate daughter?'

Daughter?

At the odd turn of phrase, Will flinches and frowns down at him. Surely Hannibal isn't suggesting… What?

The Alpha walks away, moving to his desk before Will can check his expression.

What does he mean by that? Is he suggesting something?

Hannibal knows he's an Omega. Everybody knows Omegas are built for one thing; breeding. Even Omegan males can carry children, though they are a rare occurrence these days, and only getting scarcer with each generation.

He doesn't know what to say to that. His heart trips over itself and he's thrown back to that first night, when he'd walked into Abigail's hospital room to find Hannibal dozing in the chair, holding the girl's hand to protect and comfort her. He feels sweat prick his forehead as he remembers the emotions that overwhelmed him as he sat and stared at Hannibal's sleeping face…

I like you…

Standing by his desk now, Hannibal continues to speak.

'You saved Abigail Hobbs's life. You also orphaned her. That comes with certain emotional obligations, regardless of *biological disorders*.'

Fuck you, self-righteous bastard.

Will scowls at the safety of the bookshelves, allowing his acid tongue and quickfire temper to get the better of him as he snaps back at the Alpha,

'*You* were there. You saved her life, too. Do *you* feel *obligated*?'

He's expecting Hannibal to react with anger, defensiveness, or even, laughably, frustration. He has a way of winding Alphas up, challenging them head-on. But Hannibal, in line with his earlier theory that the man never gets frustrated with anything, simply stares at him and says, with no trace of embarrassment,

'Yes. I feel a staggering amount of obligation. I feel responsibility. I've fantasized about scenarios where my actions may have allowed a different fate for Abigail Hobbs.'

Fuck…

Will feels his breath catch. His heart stumbles again and he's acutely aware of the heat radiating down his spine. Hannibal's voice, normally so calm and controlled, is quivering with restrained emotion. He reminds Will of a storm – fury and beautiful violence locked up behind dark eyes and an unsettling smile.

He nods, eyes drifting away again.

Okay… Maybe you're not so bad after all.

Then he's speaking before he fully realizes he's voicing his thoughts out loud.

'Jack thinks Abigail Hobbs helped her dad kill those girls.'

Hannibal considers him.

'How does that make you feel?'

Oh, please.

Will scoffs. He can feel his eyes flash bright gold as his temper flares again, but his lips curve into a bitter smile all the same. It's a stupid question, and one he's certain Hannibal asked *just* to wind him up.

Fucking Alphas.

'How does it make *you* feel?' he retorts.

Hannibal, collected as ever, takes the backlash gracefully.

'I find it vulgar,' he says, and Will's chest loosens just a little. Okay… This is good. Hannibal's opening up to him… They can talk. It doesn't have to be psychiatrist-patient…

'Me too,' he replies.

‘And entirely possible,’ Hannibal adds, walking his fingers over the surface of his desk so as not to look at Will. Giving him space? Respecting his need for distance, or a lack of eye contact? Will isn’t sure, but he appreciates the reprieve.

‘It’s not what happened,’ he says, pacing again. He’s doing a circuit of the room, as best he can, forcing Hannibal to turn with him if he wants to keep Will in his line of sight.

‘Jack will ask her when she wakes up,’ Hannibal says. ‘Or, he’ll have one of *us* ask her.’

Us…

God. They’re an *us* already…

Don’t get ahead of yourself, you idiot.

Will focusses instead on the hideous idea of Jack sending either of them to Abigail’s hospital room, to shake her awake and immediately ask her if she helped her father kill and eat half a dozen girls her own age…

‘Is this *therapy*, or a *support* group?’ he asks, huffing out a nervous laugh. Makes the mistake of glancing down as he rounds the final corner of the gallery, and sees Hannibal’s smile as he sniffs a laugh. His stomach jumps up and he feels a trickle of slick dampen his ass cheeks at how *handsome* Hannibal. Especially when he smiles.

Fuck…

And Hannibal, his dark eyes glittering, answers seriously even as his mouth curves into an impish grin. Will can *feel* the strand between them, quivering and golden.

Understanding. Acceptance.

‘It’s whatever you need it to be,’ he promises.

Fuck… This is gonna turn into a regular thing, isn’t it…?

Will searches the ceiling for a way out, a last, desperate attempt not to let this man into his head, and then he leans his arms on the balustrade.

‘Whatever he needs’ sessions with Hannibal could be… comforting.

He can’t. He shouldn’t.

And then Hannibal speaks again, grounding him and dragging him out of the spiraling thoughts.

‘Will.’ The way he says his name catches Will’s entire attention. Not sharp, just… Hannibal *expects* his focus, so he gets it. When Will stares down at him, though, the Alpha’s gaze is

gentle, and, when he speaks, it is tender. ‘The mirrors in your mind *can* reflect the best of yourself, *not* the worst of someone else.’

He… What can he say to that? Will just *looks* at him, his heart squeezing an extra, painful, beat into his chest as Hannibal speaks directly at the shadow inside him.

You know me…

God. He wants to climb down that ladder right now and kiss Hannibal. Push him into his desk chair, crawl onto his lap and –

Growling to himself, Will flicks his head in irritation, shaking off the thoughts. He knows he’ll take refuge in his anger again, but it’s easier to be sharp and defensive. He doesn’t understand what he’s feeling with Hannibal, and he has no intention of exploring it right now. Not when he’s been *forced* to come here.

‘So how is this gonna work, then?’ he demands, pushing away from the railing and resuming his pacing, now moving back towards the ladder. ‘“Whatever I need” is pretty vague.’

‘I want to help you understand your thinking,’ Hannibal replies. He takes every twist and turn from Will in his stride, and, for some reason, his unflustered acceptance irritates Will even more. Doesn’t he feel *anything?*

‘That sounds an *awful* lot like *therapy*,’ he drawls, scowling at Hannibal. ‘What if I don’t *want* that?’

‘You resent being seen as a specimen,’ Hannibal says, and Will pauses to listen because Hannibal just seems to be able to cut through all the bullshit and see into the heart of him. ‘Something to be prodded and poked and understood. Your thoughts and emotions broken down and categorized into little more than biological impulses and the products of your upbringing.’

‘Wouldn’t *you?*’ Will asks quietly, and Hannibal nods.

‘Yes.’ He strides to the leather armchairs and gestures to one. ‘I suggest we talk. As friends.’

‘We’re not friends,’ Will says, but his voice is muted. It’s a weak argument, and the gleam in Hannibal’s eyes says he knows it, too.

‘We could be.’

‘I have friends,’ Will mumbles, even as he heads towards the ladder like a good little Omega. He climbs down and makes his way to the armchair opposite Hannibal, sinking into it with a reluctant sigh. ‘Fine. Let’s *talk*.’

Hannibal grins again, and unbuttons his suit jacket before talking his own seat. He crosses one long leg over the other and clasps his hands in his lap. Poised and ready to strike at any moment.

‘Why did you leave Homicide?’ he asks. Will’s chest closes in a fist, but he hides the sudden flash of fear behind an eye roll.

‘I didn’t have the stomach for pulling the trigger,’ he mutters. Hannibal narrows his eyes.

‘That sounds like something Jack would say.’

Will sniffs, and looks off to the side. Taps his hand on the armrest and then realizes that probably makes him look really nervous. He stops.

‘Got stabbed.’

‘Because you failed to discharge your weapon?’ Hannibal asks, and Will glares at him. He can *feel* how gold his eyes are, can feel the tension thrumming in him like a livewire, but he is *not* discussing this. Not with Hannibal. Not with *anyone*.

‘*Yes*,’ he growls. ‘I didn’t shoot when I had the chance. I got stabbed. I left.’

Hannibal doesn’t fidget the way most people do. When he sits, he holds himself utterly still, completely at peace with himself and the space that he occupies.

I wish I could be that calm, Will thinks.

‘That experience shaped you,’ the Alpha says. ‘How did you feel, when you shot Garrett Jacob Hobbs?’

‘He’d just cut his daughter’s *throat*,’ Will snaps. ‘I *felt* like I had to *stop* him.’

‘Did it feel good?’

Will finds himself unable to breathe for a moment. His shadow coils too thickly around his throat, cutting off his voice, and he has a sudden fear that it’s going to bleed into his eyes and turn them black.

Yes…

He swallows, resuming his tapping, and looks down.

‘I killed Hobbs because I *had* to,’ he says quietly. ‘He was a murderer.’

‘One could argue, so are you,’ Hannibal points out, and Will looks at him again. The Alpha gives a delicate shrug. ‘Your motivations may have been different, but the outcome is the same. You’ve both killed.’

After so long reliving the memories of other people’s kills, I finally got to create my own…

Nausea swirls in his belly at how *pleased* his darkness feels… How pleased a part of *him* feels…

Killing Hobbs had made him feel more alive than he'd ever felt before. Every cell in his body had screamed with fiery passion because he was still here, and Hobbs was not.

It was, and still is, a dangerous feeling.

'Tell me, Will.' Hannibal's brisk voice drags him out of his thoughts, and Will finds he can breathe again. 'How did your parents react when you presented as Omega?'

'No, no; we're *not* talking about my parents, Dr Lecter.' Will scoffs and stares up at the ceiling, surrendering to his urge to flee by getting up out of the chair to pace the room again. 'Quid pro quo, *Doctor*. Why psychiatry?'

Hannibal remains seated, though Will can feel his eyes watching him as he moves from the desk to the smaller table near the fireplace. It is covered in sketches, some finished, others mid-progress. They are exquisite, and Will brushes a finger across the sheet protecting them, careful not to smudge the graphite beneath.

'Look through them, if you like,' Hannibal offers. 'As for your question; I've always been fascinated by the workings of the mind. I studied neurology for a while, but I found a better use for my scalpel with my art.'

Will looks down and sees the knife sitting next to the pencils. Each one is sharpened to a fine point, and the blade has a smudge on it from its new use. His fingers twitch at the urge to look through the drawings, but he only allows himself to look at one. A detailed rendition of a Gothic building, shaded until it could just as well be a photograph. He has no idea what building it is, or where, but there is a sense of nostalgia to the image. Memories and emotion, lingering on the page.

'When did you adopt your first dog?' Hannibal asks, drawing him back in. Another line. A different bait. This time, Will bites.

'I was twelve,' he replies, moving towards the piano in the corner of the room. There are more emotions here, hanging in the air like fog. Joy, sadness… A sense of peace… 'Found him wandering the shoreline.' He huffs a laugh. 'Took me three days to get him home.'

'You were permitted to keep him?'

Will shrugs, his hands back in his pockets to avoid touching anything else. This is Hannibal's space; the Alpha won't appreciate Will putting his scent all over it. The question throws him back to his childhood in Louisiana; Bill Graham had been too busy to notice what Will was up to most of the time, and Will made sure his new pet kept out of the way. It wasn't really until it came time to move on that Bill questioned it, but as Sammie hadn't caused a problem so far, Will found it easy to convince his father not to leave the dog behind. And if he'd used some Omegan charms, a tilt of the head, a flash of gold eyes and an appeasing touch… Well, he didn't do it often.

'How do you know Alana?' Will asks, wandering back towards the chairs. He's more relaxed now, and he wonders if Hannibal mentioned the dog on purpose.

Probably.

‘I mentored her during her residency at Johns Hopkins,’ Hannibal replies. He smiles when Will sits back down, and Will only just manages to resist the urge to roll his eyes at him. Again. ‘How did *you* meet her?’ the Alpha asks.

Will’s heart manages to keep from stumbling again, but he has to pause for a moment to make sure his voice isn’t tight when he speaks.

‘She was giving a guest lecture on criminal profiling to the New Orleans Police Department,’ he says. ‘I was a detective at the time, but she realized pretty quickly what I was, and what I was *pretending* to be, and offered to help me keep my job. After I got stabbed, she helped me apply for the teaching post at Quantico.’

Hannibal brushes dust from his trousers, and then re-clasps his hands together. A little gesture, making him look human amidst his predatory stillness. Will wonders if it’s killing him; not being allowed to ask all the questions burning his tongue.

‘Your accent is dulled,’ Hannibal murmurs. ‘Is that a conscious decision?’

Will feels his cheeks flush, and he looks away. Hannibal nods.

‘You don’t want to associate yourself with Louisiana,’ he says, making Will scowl because that sounds so… *pathetic.*

‘We lived in Michigan for a while,’ he mutters. Too defensive. ‘It faded. And besides, I *did* get stabbed there.’ Even more defensive. *Fuck*. He rubs his fingertips together and then taps his thigh. Five knocks. A pause. It’s a bad habit, one he’s had since childhood, but he can’t seem to shake it. It used to drive his dad crazy. ‘What’s *your* accent, Doctor?’

‘Lithuania,’ Hannibal replies. ‘Though I attended a boarding school in Paris.’

‘You’ve travelled a lot,’ Will says. He ducks his head, scraping his nail over the coffee stain. He should offer something… a crumb. Something *safe*. ‘I’d like to visit Florida someday.’

‘Perhaps you will,’ Hannibal replies. ‘For me, Italy has always held a special place in my heart.’

‘I’ve never been. Is it nice?’

‘It’s magnificent,’ Hannibal replies, passion warming his tone and setting his eyes on fire. Will can’t help but smile back. ‘If you can, you should visit.’

‘I wouldn’t know where to start,’ Will admits. Hannibal rises, so suddenly and smoothly that it catches him by surprise, and he shrinks back before he realizes the Alpha is holding out a hand to help him up. He hesitates, but Hannibal is still smiling, and Will places his palm over the Alpha’s.

He jolts; Hannibal’s skin is warm and dry, smooth as silk and firm over his bones. He feels strong, pulling Will to his feet with dangerous ease, and Will has a stupid, sudden urge to fold

himself against the taller man and just be held.

It's gone in an instant; Hannibal releases him, and leads him instead to one of the bookshelves near the piano. He takes down a large leather-bound book and opens it for Will to see the images inside.

'Florence is where I became a man,' Hannibal purrs, allowing Will to lean in close, their shoulders brushing, and they both look down at the conceptual sketch of the *duomo* at the *Santa Maria del Fiore*. 'I have recreated this cathedral many times, from both life and memory. I hope I will get to see it again one day before I die.'

Will glances at him, struck by the *ache* in his gut at the idea of Hannibal dying. It's stupid; he barely knows the man, but he's reaching out before he can help himself, just a faint brush of his fingertips over Hannibal's knuckles, his voice thick as he murmurs,

'You're not planning to die anytime soon, are you, Dr Lecter?'

Hannibal smiles at him, and Will's neck is red-hot, his heart stuttering out an extra beat as hot tingles race down his spine.

'No, my dear Will,' Hannibal murmurs, dipping his head towards him to share their private moment. 'I have no plans to die anytime soon.'

The memory fades, and Will returns to himself, sitting on his lumpy mattress, surrounded by the stench and wails of the criminally insane. His darkness rises, pulsing as Will feeds all of his anger into his it, giving it strength.

He can hear footsteps. Hoofbeats…

Here he comes…

He turns his head, staring through the gloom, and watches as the leg of his raven stag appears on the other side of the bars.

I know you…

'Hello, Will.'

Hannibal's voice is soft and calm. Will blinks, and his Alpha is stood there, coat folded neatly over one arm, visitor's badge affixed to the breast pocket of his suit jacket, hair combed back. He looks as healthy as ever; glowing with strength and vitality.

I fucking hate you.

'Dr Lecter.'

Will refuses to call him by his name, now. Not out loud, at least. Hannibal asked him to say his name, instead of Alpha. A term of endearment, and ownership… But their bond is nothing more than a physical manipulation. A mistake.

A *grievous* lapse in judgment.

He turns his face away; he can't stand to look at the other man for too long. It makes his chest hurt. As much as he'd missed him – *thought* he'd missed him… This is worse.

'Lost in thought?' Hannibal asks, tilting his head at his mate. Will's scent is buried beneath the smell of harsh detergent, and he has been given pheromone blockers to reduce the impact his Omegan musk may have on the other inmates. As a result, Hannibal finds it irritatingly difficult to place Will's emotions. They flicker across his face too fast to register, sliding in and out of an impassive mask.

You've been practicing.

'Not lost,' Will replies, his eyes tracking the cracks and spiderwebs on the dingy ceiling. He grimaces, offering Hannibal a bitter smile. 'Not anymore.'

You didn't just let me wander in the darkness; you snuffed out my light to keep me blind.

He sniffs a laugh, and Hannibal's pulse quickens in anticipation of Will talking to him. An echo of how things used to be.

'I used to hear my thoughts inside my skull with the same… um, *tone*, timbre, accent, as if the words were coming out of my mouth,' Will says. He's shaking; fine tremors that he tries to hide by wringing his hands together in his lap. Hannibal wonders if it is the result of nerves, anger, or medication.

'And now?' he asks, leaning in a fraction closer. Hungry for his attention. His thoughts.

'Now…' Will looks at him, a moment of agony twisting his features before anger furrows his brow and then smooths it out to cold *nothing*. Only the fire burning in his eyes indicates the *depth* of his emotions. 'My inner voice sounds like *you*.'

Hannibal hesitates, nothing so obvious as a movement or a blink, but he waits. And, sure enough, Will smirks at him, wet eyes glowing amber in the gloom, teeth bared in a rictus of pain.

'I can't get you out of my head,' he whispers.

The admission, drawn from him like poison, doesn't give Hannibal the satisfaction he'd thought it would. Will is repeating a sentiment he'd felt before, but those words had been spoken softly, reverently… Now, it is clear that Will wishes nothing more than to sever their connection and rid himself of the Alpha. The thought is… unsettling. Understandable, but uncomfortable.

But Hannibal was never one to surrender, and he discards his own pain. Will needs to hurt someone; how else can he grow? How else can he nurture the darkness within him? If he is to be the target, so be it.

I can endure you hating me, Will… Wound me, and free yourself.

Hannibal smiles, his eyes gleaming, and he saunters ever closer to the bars as he speaks.

‘Bonding often involves a breach of individual separateness.’

‘You’re *not* my mate,’ Will growls, pushing up from the cot because he can’t stand the idea of Hannibal being stood *over* him anymore. He refuses to submit to this man again. He paces towards the Alpha, his voice wobbling as he continues, ‘The *light* of a true mating bond won’t reach us for a million *years*, that’s how far away from true *mates* we are.’

It *hurts* to say it, but he sees his barb stick, sees the flicker of pain on Hannibal’s face, and he takes a moment’s satisfaction in watching his Alpha lower his gaze. But Hannibal is tenacious, and he simply twists like a snake to avoid the truth of their situation.

‘I imagine it’s easier to believe I am responsible for those murders, than it is to accept that you are.’

‘Sure is,’ Will snaps, raising his eyebrows at Hannibal.

Because you are.

He takes another shuddering breath, dizziness swarming him as Hannibal’s scent creeps between the iron railings and coats his skin like dust. God… He *needs* him…

Hannibal’s chest tightens when he sees the pain and longing on Will’s face. His Omega is suffering from the isolation; the separation is harder for him, though it will become equally difficult for them both, soon enough. If Will embraced their emotional connection, he might feel some reprieve.

‘Your inner voice *can* provide a method of taking control for your behavior,’ he says gently. ‘Accepting responsibility for what you’ve done.’

Will stares at him, searching his face with a mixture of disbelief and dawning realization. Hannibal wants him to reach out for him, mentally, and strengthen the bond between them… And yet also accept the lie that Hannibal spun, and take ownership of five murders so that the world turns against him even more so than it already has…

I fucking hate you.

‘Giving your thoughts words encourages clarity,’ Hannibal adds, and it’s the final straw. Will feels his eyes pulse gold and he bares his teeth in a snarl.

‘Oh, I *have* clarity,’ he hisses. His throat aches around a lump between his scent glands, and he can’t seem to find any strength to his voice, so he laces it with venom, instead. ‘About *you*.’

Hannibal sighs, feigning disappointment.

‘Our conversations, Will, weren’t only ever about you opening your eyes to the truth of who you are.’

Will's growl hangs in the air between them as he approaches the bars of the cell.

'What you did to me is *in* my head,' he says, locking eyes with Hannibal and drawing close enough that they could reach out and touch each other. 'And I *will* find it.'

Hannibal's nostrils flare and he savors Will's rich, smoky scent, watching the way the Omega's shadow grows, engulfing him in freezing black.

'I'm going to *remember*, Dr Lecter,' Will vows, pouring *all* his anger into the Alpha, trying to *poison* him through whatever mockery of a bond they have. 'And when I do, there will be a *reckoning.*'

Hannibal's breath catches at the emotions battering his mind, at the raw, dark *power* within Will. Hot pleasure zings through his abdomen and his own scent thickens with the first hint of rut as he gazes upon his mate. Will is *dangerous*, and breathtakingly beautiful for it.

There's my boy… Mylimasis…

'I have *huge* faith in you, Will,' he purrs, voice tight and mouth curling into a warm smile as pride lights his eyes red. 'I always have.'

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'You never answered my question.'

Sprawled in Hannibal's bed, Will keeps his eyes resolutely closed as his Alpha plays with the strands of hair falling over his forehead. He shifts, burrowing further beneath the warm covers, and brushes his leg against Hannibal's calf, enjoying the scratch of hair against hair.

'Hm… Which one?' he teases, reaching out to stroke Hannibal's flat stomach, tracing a ribbon scar across his ribs and a puckered ring not dissimilar to a cigarette burn. Hannibal has never told him about his scars, so Will doesn't want to ask, but they might have to play a game of *quid pro quo* if the Alpha is going to *insist* on him sharing.

'How did your parents react to your presenting as Omega?' Hannibal asks. He cradles Will closer, encouraging the smaller man to curl up against his side and rest his cheek on the muscle of his shoulder. Runs his fingers up and down Will's bicep, raising goosebumps in their wake, and Will feels a purr start rumbling deep in his chest, an unconscious and irrepressible sound of pleasure.

'Er…' He frowns, swallowing between the throat rattles. 'Well, it was just my dad by then… He was… disappointed.'

'He wanted an Alpha,' Hannibal murmurs. Will is grateful that he doesn't hug him closer, or do anything to show pity. He doesn't need it, and he certainly doesn't *want* it.

'Just not an Omega,' he mutters. 'I think he was worried what would happen to me.' He snorts and rolls his eyes, even though Hannibal can't see the gesture. 'Can't blame him; Omegan rights don't exactly *exist*, do they? A mating contract and dowry is all but a slavery contract.'

‘Social justice often stalls for great lengths of time,’ Hannibal replies, still stroking him. ‘Until the anarchists find a way to topple those in power, the regime remains the same, and the oppressed remain silenced.’

‘Spoken like a true European,’ Will says, and he feels Hannibal shift beneath him. Glances up to see the Alpha smiling at him, burgundy eyes glinting.

‘Do you not crave change, Will? The chance to live free, to be yourself, your *true* self, for all the world to see?’

In the dank darkness of his prison cell, Will clenches his hands into shaking fists at his sides.

Am I free now? Free to be my true self?

Lying flat on his back, the springs dig into his shoulder-blades. His chest heaves and heart races. Memories chase each other through his mind, overwhelming him in the vast *emptiness* of the endless night.

He *misses* Hannibal. He also *hates* that he misses him. His rage is so consuming that it makes him physically sick; he’s vomited every day since being here, though that could easily be a reaction to the pheromone blockers and the grisly swill they call “food”. His gunshot wound throbs, sending an ache through his chest and down to his stomach, and although the doctors reported a near-total recovery from the intercranial swelling caused by Prodromal Phasing, he’s had a headache since waking from the induced sleep.

Being physically close to Hannibal earlier today lessened some of those symptoms, though he’d lost what little dinner he’d eaten after remembering Hannibal’s hands on him, his fingers *in* him…

Sweat beads on his forehead. His crest throbs, swollen and tender at the base of his skull. Panic flares, but before it can consume him, Will closes his eyes. No. He’s not dealing with that right now. He’s not dealing with the fact that he’s bonded to a psychopathic murderer… A sadistic monster who manipulated him into falling for him, just to *toy* with him for his own amusement…

To fall in love with him…

Slowing his breathing, Will forces himself to relax. *In for three… out for five…*

The hospital is quiet. His fellow inmates are either sleeping, drugged or too far away for their screams to bother him. An Omega needs his sleep, after all. Dr Chilton was *very* specific about that. His concern did not extend to permit him a *nest*; Will is on trial for serial murder, after all. He gets one blanket and the same cot as everyone else, but his neighbors are silent once the lights go out.

Listening to the tiny clicks of his blinking eyes, Will wonders which is worse; the silence, or the screaming.

***

His appointment at the Federal Bureau of Investigation Headquarters, Quantico, is at eleven o'clock the following morning, and Hannibal arrives promptly, suits in hand. Beverly Katz greets him at the front desk, signing him in and passing him a laminated visitor's badge, which he pins to his jacket. The fellow Alpha is quiet, and Hannibal allows her to maintain a somewhat tense silence as they cross the campus to the forensic science lab. Beverly seems to be struggling to find words, and she has earned enough of Hannibal's respect to permit her some time to gather her thoughts.

Once they reach the lab, smothered in the cold, clinical air, Beverly seems to relax. She focuses on her task, unwrapping a fresh swab to take a sample of epithelium cells and very carefully rotating the bud into the side of Hannibal's mouth to gather the DNA.

Smiling to himself, he leans over her shoulder as he watches her store the cotton bud in an airtight tube for testing.

'I'm *amazed* what falls off the best of us when moving through a room,' he murmurs. Beverly grins back at him, rolling her eyes because he's managed to coax her out of silence.

'Lessons learned from cellular decay,' she says, blue-gloved hands writing out Hannibal's details onto the tube label. 'Enjoy the world while we have it, and give a little bit back.'

'When possible, I try to leave an indelible mark wherever I go,' Hannibal replies, inspecting the table of evidence.

'Hopefully not with your DNA,' Beverly says, quirking an eyebrow at him before striding to the row of suits awaiting inspection. Hannibal chuckles, and then wanders after her, his chest warm in the knowledge that he is permitted to see the inner workings of the FBI forensic examiners.

'How long will you have my suits?' he asks, watching as several are bagged in vacuum packages, leaving only one for Beverly to check at a time.

'You might wanna think about supplementing your wardrobe,' she replies, and Hannibal's eyes gleam.

'I frequently do.'

Beverly hums, peeling apart the sticky clear plastic that will pick up any stray hairs or fibers from the silk-wool blend of the suit.

'Y'know this is just a formality,' she says, concentrating on her work as she speaks. 'Nobody expects to find anything… Except for maybe Will Graham.'

Hannibal considers for a moment, choosing his words carefully and ignoring the sudden tug in his chest.

'He'll have to be disappointed,' he says, and Beverly glances at him. They both know he is Will's Alpha, and that his accusation is a betrayal of the worst kind. 'The beauty of what you

do, Ms. Katz, is in its certainty.' He dips his head and adds, almost as an afterthought, 'It'll be your evidence that convicts Will.'

Beverly's dark eyes widen a fraction, and then she huffs and turns away.

'Well, I found enough of it,' she mutters, heading back to the evidence table. 'No need to *infer*, or *intuit* or *trust*.'

'So much simpler than psychiatry,' Hannibal comments, following her closely and watching as Beverly slides the sheet of paper and suit-pressed plastic into a sealed evidence folder. He sighs, clasping his hands before him. 'Will is doing his best to understand where he is, and why.'

Beverly turns to face him, tilting her head in challenge.

'You were supposed to protect him.'

'From himself?' Hannibal asks, and the other Alpha's eyes flicker red.

'*Yeah*. You're his *Alpha.*' She sighs, and shakes her head. 'I'm not mad at you… Not anymore than I'm mad at myself. We all missed it… whatever *it* was… *is*…'

Hannibal turns his face away, composing his face into an expression of disappointment mingled with concern, and, perhaps, just a hint of irritation.

'We all are not suspects.'

'You're not a *suspect*,' Beverly says, softening her voice to soothe him before she grins. 'You're the new Will Graham.'

***

This newfound status within the FBI is why, immediately after his appointment with Beverly, Hannibal, "the new Will Graham", rides with the lead forensic investigator to the scene of Maryland's latest crime.

The bodies discovered by two manual laborers have been dragged from the water, and laid on the bridge above the creek. Jack Crawford watches a team of FBI field agents continue to plumb the waterfall for more bodies or evidence, and barely glances over his shoulder to greet his fellow Alpha.

'Thank you for coming, Dr Lecter,' he calls, resuming his observation of the work below.

'Jack,' Hannibal says, coming to stand behind him. The stench of the bodies is truly unbelievable, especially to someone with his sense of smell, and Hannibal focuses on breathing through his mouth, trying not to taste the decay on his tongue. 'What can I do for you?'

Jack turns, his eyes shielded by dark glasses, his face drawn and grey.

‘I was hoping you would help me with a psychological profile,’ he says, his voice tight. Hannibal notices the tremor in his shoulders when a police officer’s voice rises from the river below.

‘We found another body.’

‘This way, Doctor,’ Jack says, striding down the row of corpses, his movements stiff and jerky. As Hannibal follows, inspecting the bloated, discolored bodies, he realizes why Jack and the other Alphas at the scene are so shaken.

The victims are all Omegas.

‘This is the fourth body we’ve recovered so far,’ Jack says, pointing down to the cadaver nearest him. Hannibal holds his breath and peers closer, inspecting the blackened nose and lips, and the sunken eye sockets where fish and other marine wildlife have eaten out the soft tissue as Jack adds, ‘There’s at least one more down there.’

‘How long have they been here?’ Hannibal asks, and Jack growls in frustration.

‘Hard to say. But *someone* went to a *lot* of trouble to make sure that they were well preserved. They’ve been coated in some kind of resin.’

‘The big one was partially sealed; rotting from the inside out,’ Beverly says. Hannibal admires her stoicism given the emotional nature of the killings. ‘The other three look like they were embalmed.’

Hannibal continues to inspect each body closely, assessing and dismissing his own Alpha instincts. He feels rage, fear, grief, but they are pale echoes of his true emotions. A biological response to the scent of a dead Omega. Quite how his brain can detect the difference between a dead Beta and a dead Omega with this level of rot is a subject of curiosity, and something he will look into this evening.

‘Whatever he’s doing, he’s still figuring out how to do it,’ Jack says, starting the psychological profile aloud.

‘Were they injected with silicone?’ Hannibal asks, and Beverly crouches near one of the embalmed Omegas to poke at the resin-coated torso.

‘They were injected with *something*…’

‘Silicone?’ Jack asks, and Hannibal nods.

‘A technique for making resin-coated models out of fish,’ he explains. Something Will had taught him, during a weekend together early in their relationship. Apparently, in addition to catching the creatures, it had been his father’s habit to mount any of special importance, and one of the few activities Bill shared with his son. ‘Helps the body retain shape in death.’

Beverly frowns at this, and straightens slowly, her hands on her hips. Hannibal voices their thought aloud.

‘He’s making Omegan models.’

‘You make models of things that you wanna keep,’ Jack says, gesturing to the bodies. ‘These were tossed in the river.’

Hannibal considers, and then quirks an eyebrow.

‘Maybe they were imperfect,’ he suggests. Jack looks queasy, and even Beverly’s jaw tightens at the insinuation that *any* Omega could be less than ideal. But it has a ring of truth to it, and Jack’s eyes gleam with the first whiff of the hunt.

‘These are his discards.’

So where are his keepsakes?

***

Following Jack’s questions regarding his therapy sessions, Hannibal writes out a letter of authorization for Bedelia, which he signs with his heavy sterling silver fountain pen before his late-week session with the psychiatrist, leaning on her glass side table before the display of white and orange tulips.

‘I’m giving you informed consent to discuss me as your patient,’ he explains, handing over the page once the ink has dried. Bedelia takes the letter with a frown, her pulse fluttering in her throat.

‘With whom?’ she asks, barely glancing at the words on the heavy parchment.

‘Jack Crawford,’ Hannibal replies, and Bedelia’s heart sinks. She watches as he sits back in his chair, calm and content, and then frowns at the weight in her hands.

‘Disclosure of patient information should be limited to the requirements of the situation…’ She glances down again, trying to control her breathing before she sets the paper down beside her, her hands trembling. ‘What *is* the situation, Hannibal?’

Hannibal gives a delicate half-shrug.

‘Will Graham made accusations. Jack’s only being thorough.’

‘You’re keeping Agent Crawford close,’ Bedelia says, sharp eyes reading the closed expression on Hannibal’s face, his shuttered gaze… She only sees herself reflected when she looks at him today.

‘We share an obsession,’ Hannibal replies, quoting her earlier observation. He sighs, dark eyes drifting off to the side for a moment, a sad smile playing around his lips. ‘I got to be Will Graham today,’ he says. ‘I consulted at an FBI crime scene… I stood in Will’s shoes, looked through his eyes and I saw death… How I imagined he would see it.’

Darkness and pain… Ripping at my soul, eating me alive because I am vulnerable… Hurting me… Will needs my protection more than I thought. Needs my help, to strengthen his shadow

to shield himself from the ugliness of this world.

Bedelia nods slowly, watching Hannibal's eyes flicker red and warm with a fierce passion. But she cannot stop the fear pooling in her chest, making her heart skip a beat.

'Why would you be inviting the scrutiny of the FBI?' she asks, golden eyebrows drawn together into a worried frown. Hannibal looks surprised at the question.

'I'm being as open and honest as I know how,' he replies. Frustration makes Bedelia's tongue sharp, and she tuts before replying,

'You maintain an air of transparency… while putting *me* in the position to lie for you… Again.'

Hannibal shifts his weight, considering the challenge.

'You're not just lying for me,' he reminds her. He waits a moment and then lifts his maroon eyes to Bedelia; a reminder of his greater dominance. Sees her hesitation, and then the dimming of her gaze as she submits.

'How far will this flirtation with the FBI go?' Bedelia asks, her voice tinged with the same concern drawing her brows together and her mouth down in an unhappy twist.

'It would seem Jack Crawford is less suspicious of me than you are,' Hannibal says lightly, and Bedelia's blue irises flicker crimson. Only a moment, but enough.

'*Jack Crawford* doesn't know what you're capable of,' she replies.

And there it is; Bedelia is *afraid* of him. Truly afraid, after peeling back the armor. She is pushing, testing the boundaries as though seeking an escape from the web she finds herself trapped in.

But there is no escape for her, and Hannibal tilts his head, allowing the dark monsters inside to rear up and taste the air between them with flickering, forked tongues. Allows Bedelia a *glimpse* behind the mask again, to remind her exactly *what* she is playing with. And what will happen, when she loses.

He does nothing to suppress the hungry, predatory smile warming his face, and smells the salty, spicy tang in his therapist's scent.

'Neither do you.'

***

Alana's Friday morning visit is a pleasant break from the drudgery of prison life, if for no other reason than her light, fresh scent is a welcome distraction from the stench of urine and sweat sweeping from the pores of the violent crime ward. The Beta sits on a folding chair a few feet from the bars of his cell, legs crossed and hands clasped over one knee, laminate visitor's badge pinned to her sweater.

‘How are you feeling, Will?’ Alana asks, pitching her voice to be low and soothing. Will scoffs, pacing back and forth, tension crackling up his spine like lightning.

‘Never better,’ he mutters, rolling his eyes at the water-stained ceiling. From the corner of his eye, he catches Alana’s flinch, and decides to appease her. She could still help him, after all. ‘The sickness is going down,’ he lies.

‘Good.’ Alana smiles. ‘And the chest pain?’

‘Um, a bit less. It’s probably just stress.’

‘Do you want me to speak to Dr Chilton about getting any aspirin for you?’ the Beta asks, blushing when Will frowns at her. At the callousness of her question.

‘I think I’ve had enough tablets to last me a lifetime,’ the Omega says quietly. He swallows back the lump in his throat and hugs his elbows. ‘How are the dogs?’

Alana’s smile saddens. She understands his need for a distraction, and his concern for his pets.

‘Good.’ She grimaces. ‘Well, Winston keeps running away but the others are adjusting,’ she says. Will frowns again, but this time in concern.

‘Where does Winston go?’ he asks, and Alana shakes her head.

‘Home.’

Will huffs, rotating his neck.

‘Well, he’s not gonna find me *there*.’

‘Not today,’ Alana says softly. ‘Maybe someday he might, with the right defense.’

Will sighs, and turns towards her. He doesn’t uncross his arms.

‘I don’t currently have legal representation,’ he says, and Alana nods.

‘You keep firing your lawyers.’

‘No, they’re the FBI’s lawyers,’ Will growls, moving away to pace again. Three steps to the right. Turn. Four steps back. He hears Alana shift her weight on the uncomfortable metal chair.

‘Then I’ll find you a lawyer who’s not affiliated with the FBI,’ Alana says.

Will counts his steps, waiting for the knot in his stomach to loosen and for his heart to slow down before he speaks again. Even so, his voice still quivers.

‘What defense do you think I *have?*’

‘Automatism,’ Alana replies, her blue eyes flashing as she lifts her head. ‘Allows a defendant to argue they shouldn’t be held criminally liable for their actions, due to unconsciousness.’

‘Unconsciousness?’ Will pulls a face at her. Alana’s brows draw together and she sits forward, as earnest as she was the first time he spoke with her about Coby’s attack.

‘Will… You were in Heat… Your mind was on *fire* and you *Imprinted* on Garrett Jacob Hobbs. You had *no* control over what you were doing, much less *remember* doing it.’

Will barely keeps himself from rolling his eyes, and instead lowers his head to meet Alana’s gaze squarely.

‘What if I *could* remember?’ he asks. Hesitates, swallowing the nervous spit gathering on the back of his tongue and ignores the way his palms tingle and sweat with nerves. ‘What if I *could* remember how this was done to me?’

‘What if you could remember how you did it?’ Alana corrects, and the rebuke is like a kick in the gut. Will clamps his lips shut on a pained little whine and turns away, pacing again to distract himself.

‘You believe Hannibal,’ he mutters. Alana sighs.

‘I believe the Will Graham standing in front of me now is incapable of that violence,’ she replies. Unbeknownst to her, Dr Frederick Chilton has rigged Will’s cell with audio and video recording technology, and he is currently sat at his desk, his laptop open before him, watching and listening to their every word.

‘I believe you lost your mind.’ Chilton hears Alana’s voice, tinny through the laptop speakers, as the Beta tries to console the unstable Omega. ‘And for periods of time you weren’t the Will Graham I know.’

Glaring at the grey walls of his cell, Will rubs his temple in frustration.

‘No, I *hear* Hannibal’s voice,’ he insists. ‘In the *well* of my mind… I hear him saying words that he’s never said to me… This isn’t my imagination it’s… it’s something else.’

‘Will, he’s your *Alpha*,’ Alana says, staring at him with wet, wide eyes. Pitying eyes. ‘Of *course* you hear his voice. You have a *connection* to him. And he cared for you during your Heats.’

‘He’s *not* my Alpha,’ Will snaps, making the Beta recoil. Alana stares at him, shocked by the level of *venom* in his voice, at the way his gold eyes flash near-silver with anger. Will snarls, and tugs at his curls. ‘He’s not my Alpha,’ he mumbles, his hands shaking. ‘He’s *nothing* to me.’

‘Will…’ Alana’s voice falters, and she falls silent when the Omega straightens his back and very deliberately approaches the cage door.

Will looks down at her, his heart slowing to a steady thud behind his ribs as he stares at his former friend and confidante.

‘Have you ever helped a patient recover memories?’

***

Once she agrees to try hypnosis with him, it takes Alana until lunchtime to convince Frederick to allow her into the sealed interview room with Will. The Alpha insists on attending until Alana agrees to share her notes in exchange for an hour’s private session. She would have preferred two, but she knows not to push her luck, and sets up the metronome light, pulling Will into a deep state of relaxation as quickly as is safe.

Staring at the pendulum, watching it swing back and forth, back and forth, in time to the steady clicks almost in rhythm with his heart, Will feels himself slipping into the warm current of his mind. His visual, if he were to describe it to anyone, is one of gold light sweeping back and forth over a crime scene, reversing time and undoing the murder so that he can re-watch it, re-live it… So he can *see*…

‘Close your eyes,’ Alana whispers, her voice a sibilant hiss from very far away. Odd, Will thinks, allowing heavy eyelids to droop, that she should sound so distant when she was only on the other side of the table. The pendulum clicks and swings, but the current is rising, soaking through his muscles and into his bones. The light slows… Time slows, and he sinks deeper…

Alana’s voice again, pulling him under. Guiding him.

‘Feel the heaviness in your limbs…’

Will looks at her. Looks at her ebony skin, her glowing eyes… Her hair is smoke, floating around her head… She’s been touched by the darkness; consumed by it… *Tainted* by it…

‘Imagine yourself in a safe and relaxing place,’ Alana croons. She rises, crawling closer like a beast of old. A dark goddess, intent on devouring him… ‘Safe to relax *completely*…’

She’s looming over him now, right in front of him, and he can see the blurred edges of her fighting with the light from the window. She is darkness, she is a shadow of herself, and she wants to pull him into that dark place with her.

‘No matter how deeply you go,’ she whispers, sucking the air from him as his chest becomes thick and full, the warm river rising and his own shadow spilling out to sink him. ‘My voice will go with you…’

Will tilts his head. He bares his throat, surrendering to her, and Alana kisses him, her darkness washing through him, *into* him, mingling with his own shadow until there’s nothing but blackness. Nothing but –

Hannibal’s dining room, the walls shadowed and poorly lit. A table, groaning under the weight of food, but the banquet is not for him. It is not for anyone alive. Rotting fruit and dying squid… pomegranate oozing blood-red juice onto fine china plates and a centipede slithering from the eye socket of a skull…

Ravens pecking at Cassie Boyle, trying to tear her flesh away before they were disturbed… You ripped out her lungs while she was still alive…

Black feathers, a silk table cloth… Dried flowers crumbling in their vases. Will's crest throbs, it *hurts*, and he's so very, very cold…

He's not alone. As Will lifts his head, staring past the plates of death, he sees it… His demon… His monster… His *wendigo*…

Skeletal, blank white eyes staring into him, tearing apart his soul, sharp claws always searching for more… *Eternally starving. Never able to sate your hunger… How does the legend go?*

And a sick feeling growing in his stomach as he looks back at his place setting, at the gold-rimmed plate before him, his cutlery gleaming in the cold light…

He has an ear. Abigail's ear, bloodied and pale, waiting for him to lift up his fork and –

Will comes back to himself with a shuddering gasp. He's shaking, shivering with cold sweat, his crest swollen and stinging on the back of his neck, boxers damp with slick even as his stomach roils.

'This… this isn't working,' he manages, grabbing for the metronome to still it. The chain between his cuffs, attaching him to the ring bolted onto the table, clinks too loudly in the quiet room, and Will flinches.

'What did you see?' Alana asks, her fingertips leaving shining sweat on the tabletop when she reaches forward to cover his hands with her own. Will recoils, but she holds on tight, squeezing his palms to ground him in the present. 'Will; what did you *see?'*

Will blinks away tears, his heart thundering and blood roaring in his ears. He licks his lips, tries to speak and finds his voice gone. Squashed down by the panic choking his throat. Alana's brows furrow and her mouth twists in misery as she rubs her thumbs back and forth over Will's knuckles, trying to calm him enough that he can speak.

How can he? What did he see? How can he tell her?

I saw death.

***

Having received Hannibal's consent to discuss him with his therapist, Jack makes an appointment to see Dr Bedelia Du Maurier. She greets him with cool courtesy, and Jack smooths out his suit jacket, oddly nervous as he settles himself into the silk-lined armchair. Perhaps it's because she's a psychiatrist, with her guarded, clever blue eyes giving away nothing, whilst seeing everything…

'How to best provide a psychological profile of Hannibal Lecter,' Bedelia sighs, crossing one long leg over the other before regarding the FBI Agent.

‘Yes, well, you wouldn’t be performing this evaluation for any *legal* purposes,’ Jack promises. ‘We don’t need you as an expert witness or anything like that… Just consider this two people talking.’

Bedelia narrows her eyes, considering him down the length of her nose.

‘Let’s talk.’

Jack’s smile is accompanied by a hint of red in his eyes; a flash of dominance.

‘Yes, let’s talk,’ he says. Bedelia sighs again.

‘Certain personality types prefer to interact with the world differently than others,’ she says. Jack nods, showing his understanding, and spreads his hands to encourage more.

‘What personality type *is* Hannibal?’ he asks, and Bedelia can’t help but smile.

‘He is the Social Anti-social,’ she replies. She waits, and Jack has to prompt again.

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning, he isn’t easily influenced.’ Bedelia can see the line appearing between Jack’s eyebrows, and she continues, ‘Hannibal’s *capacity* to be shaped by his social environment seemed non-existent… before he met Will Graham.’

That intrigues Jack, and his head tilt encourages further elaboration from her.

‘Will Graham convinced Hannibal that he was seeing someone as *unique* as himself,’ Bedelia says, allowing her distaste for the Omega to color her tone. ‘Just as he convinced *you* which Will Graham *you* were seeing.’

‘We both thought we knew him,’ Jack says, checking his understanding with the psychiatrist. Bedelia blinks rather than nods.

‘Did you see yourself in Will Graham?’ she asks softly. A whisper’s edge, sharper and deadlier than a razor.

Jack hides his flinch.

‘I… saw an asset,’ he admits. ‘*And* a friend…’

‘Your mistake,’ Bedelia replies. Jack meets her eye, challenging her, but Bedelia holds the gaze steadily. ‘Psychopaths are *narcissists*,’ she says. ‘Narcissists *often* masquerade as sensitive introverts… Tell me, Agent Crawford… Is that not how Will Graham presented himself to the world?’

‘You think he manipulated us?’ Jack asks. ‘Manipulated *Hannibal?*’

Bedelia’s eyes gleam.

‘I think Will Graham is far more dangerous than either of you realize.’

***

Hannibal hosts Frederick Chilton for dinner that evening, creating the perfect excuse to check on his Omega’s welfare whilst under the other psychiatrist’s care.

Returning from the kitchen, he finds his fellow Alpha standing before the marble fireplace, admiring his *Rubens* painting of *Leda and the Swan*, and Hannibal smiles; he feels a warm glow of affection whenever he sees it because it was his mother’s, and hung in her bedroom when he’d been a child. He likes that Frederick is enjoying the image.

‘Salted and ash-baked celeriac, with foraged *Sel Fou*,’ he says, announcing himself and the dish as he brings the plates to the table. ‘Frederick, you have *tested* me.’ At Dr Chilton’s questioning eyebrow, he explains, ‘It’s rare that I cook a meatless meal.’

‘I lost a kidney,’ Frederick whines, making no move to leave the warmth of the crackling fire. ‘I have to watch my protein intake.’

‘You didn’t *lose* it, Frederick; it was *taken* from you,’ Hannibal replies, pouring them each a glass of Sauvignon Blanc to accompany the dish. ‘And I remain impressed with your recovery.’

Frederick smiles, and rolls his eyes at the compliment even as he shuffles closer to the table.

‘One can grow to love beets.’ He pauses for a moment, and then sets his silver-handled walking cane against the chair. ‘Alana Bloom was visiting with your former patient today,’ he says carefully, eyeing Hannibal from beneath calculating eyebrows.

‘Will was never my patient,’ Hannibal says, taking his seat.

‘The irony is that he *is* my patient, but he refuses to speak to me,’ Frederick says, hefting the dining chair out so that he can sit down. He grimaces. ‘Makes me feel like I’m fumbling with his head like a freshman pulling at a panty girdle.’

Hannibal works hard to suppress his purr at Frederick’s admission, and concentrates on his food.

‘Will is going to be a challenge for any psychiatrist,’ he says, deceptively lightly. He sees Frederick’s eyes light up, flicker red, even, and then the smaller Alpha is leaning across the table, speaking with passion.

‘He is so lucid, so perceptive… He’s trained in criminal psychology *and* he is a mass murderer.’ He unfolds his napkin and lays it across his knee. ‘He is a prize patient… Or should be.’

Hannibal chews slowly and then swallows his disappointingly vegetarian forkful.

‘How *was* Dr Bloom’s visit?’ he asks, feigning casual interest. In reality, his heart squeezes out an extra thump and his chest tightens at the idea of the Beta sniffing around his mate,

gaining his trust again when Hannibal is still rejected. And, of course, there is the concern that Will may say something about Hannibal that she believes…

Frederick grins, his eyes glinting.

'He asked her to hypnotize him,' he replies, speaking around a mouthful of celeriac. 'So he could recover his memories.' He purrs, and points to his stuffed cheeks. 'This is delicious.'

Hannibal smiles, thought the compliment is as bland to him as the meal. After all, there is no skill in plucking a vegetable from the ground and baking it. As well, the knowledge that Will has engaged Dr Bloom in memory recall is… disturbing. His Omega has every chance of recovering his prodromal phases, and of understanding *exactly* what Hannibal did to help him, but without his Alpha there to guide and support him. It could undo *all* their good work.

'Was he successful?' he asks, more quietly than he'd like. Fortunately, Frederick seems not to notice, for his tone is sly when he replies,

'Only in playing Dr Bloom.' A pause, and then he adds, 'It's *sad* to see such a brilliant psychiatrist fall for such hoary old chestnuts.'

'She wants to believe him,' Hannibal replies, wiping sauce from his knife to his fork, his appetite eroded by talks of his Omega. There is an odd knot in his stomach, made worse by mention of Will, and he finds himself struggling to swallow. 'I do, too.'

'You *do* realize you're his favorite topic of conversation?' Frederick asks, sitting back in his chair and raising an eyebrow at the other Alpha. 'Hannibal, Hannibal, Hannibal. Not with *me*, of course, but with everyone *else* who will listen.' He smirks. 'He tells everyone that *you* are a *monster*.'

Hannibal affects surprise, and straightens as though mildly offended by the suggestion. As he reaches for his glass of wine, he cannot help but grin, his eyes sparkling as he replies,

'Well, in that case, you are dining with a psychopathic murderer, Frederick.'

Frederick chuckles, and raises his own glass to toast the absurdity. Hannibal dips his nose to gather up the scent of the wine and then takes a slow sip.

My poor Will, he thinks, savoring the crisp freshness against the heaviness of the celeriac. *You scream out your truth, but nobody listens to your Omegan voice. Nobody but me.*

***

A crowded subway carriage. Hundreds of tired commuters headed home after a long day at work. Alphas and Betas mingle together, jostling elbows and sharing breath, but the solitary Omega stands alone, permitted a respectful space and a pole to hold onto as he sways against the movement of the wheels.

He jumps when an Alpha's hot palm covers his knuckles. Pain zings through him, a chemical reaction to another Alpha, not his own, touching him. The Omega shrugs the man off, trying

for a glare but too submissive to do more than glance at him with golden eyes before turning away. Silently hoping he'll leave. That he won't cause a scene.

Please… Please don't cause a scene… Just let me get home…

A soothing scent rises, pheromones seeping from the Omega's skin, and the Alpha purrs. Comforting. Appeasing.

And then he speaks, and he shatters the calm.

'You have nice skin.'

A tingle runs down the Omega's spine, but the mysterious Alpha has gone when he plucks up the courage to look up again, blended back into the crowd like a ghost. Metal wheels squeal and the carriage groans as it rocks around a corner. Grumbles rise and someone coughs…

His heartbeat slows, and the Omega takes another breath. He *hates* travelling alone.

Just one more day. One more day and my Alpha is home… I can make it one more day…

***

That night, he dreams of an alarm wailing far out at sea. It's only when his cat paws at his face that he realizes the alarm is real, and sounds very much like his car…

Rolling out of bed, he pads downstairs to the front door of his apartment and grabs his keys. Shrugs into his thick sweater because the temperature has been rapidly dropping since dusk, and he can already feel a chill creeping up through his socked feet.

He yanks the door open and glares out at his car, expecting to see the local kids trying to break into it again. Wipes sleep from his blurry eyes, but he doesn't see anyone hanging around… Maybe they knocked it, sounded the alarm and ran off.

Taking a few steps out into the freezing parking lot, he turns it off. It falls silent with a chirrup and he breathes out a sigh of relief. At least none of his neighbors are awake and complaining.

Frowning, he wanders closer. What's that plastic wrap hanging out the trunk? He doesn't have plastic in his trunk…

He checks the driver's side and inside of the car. Nothing… There's no-one there… Pops the lid of the trunk and peers inside. More plastic wrap… What the…?

On silent, hunter's feet, the Alpha creeps up behind him, ready to pounce.

You're mine, little Omega.

***

Examining resin-coated bodies at 9am the next morning, Jack Crawford regrets eating a glazed donut for breakfast, and concentrates on Zeller as the Beta explains how they identified the six Omegan victims. Studiously ignores the way the Beta taps his pen against the hardened *throat* of the nearest body.

'Dental and medical records placed the six, all Omegas, both men and women, different ages, different ethnicities, all from different states. *Nothing* in common, except they all disappeared from their homes, *with* their vehicles.'

'*And* they all had large amounts of *heroin* in their systems,' Price adds, and Jack hums, moving between the bodies as he works his way down the row.

'Enough to be the cause of death?'

'And *then* some,' Price replies. Jack frowns down at the body between him and the smaller Beta.

'What's this strange skin discoloration on these bodies?' he asks. It is Beverly Katz who replies, turning with a clipboard in her blue-gloved hands.

'We have traces of BHT,' she says. 'Which is a color preservative.'

Jack nods, his donut churning in his stomach.

'He wants them to look alive,' he growls.

'Shot 'em up with a little China White, injected them with preservatives, and then filled the bodies with silicone so they don't emaciate,' Zeller says, leaning forwards as he gestures to the body beneath him. 'Then he seals them with a hard resin shell.'

Fighting bile, Jack turns away and inspects the corpse beside him. He needs to get a grip; he's seen a dead Omega before… But six of them, laid out before him, with their Alphas waiting to claim the bodies…?

'What are these puncture wounds?' he asks, hovering his own gloved fingers scant millimeters above the dark holes.

'Those are like eyelets,' Zeller says, pointing again. 'Er, something was threaded through, they were strung up, mounted, presented…' He shrugs, trailing off as Jack allows a growl to rumble up his throat and spill into the cold morgue air between them.

'So *how's* he choosing them?' he asks, glancing up at Beverly. As the fellow Alpha in the room, he knows she will understand his pain. Given the thick ring of red around her dark irises, he knows she does, and her voice is tight with frustration as she replies,

'We got *nothing*. Appears to be random, but if this is the discard pile…?' She sighs, stepping closer to the smallest Omega, a young boy on the end table. 'I'm curious to know how many were keepers.'

Jack sighs, and then grapples control of his instincts.

‘Alright, I want a list of any missing Omegas that disappeared along with their vehicles in the neighboring states. Got it?’

‘Got it,’ Zeller confirms, watching Jack leave the room. He rolls his shoulders, feeling tendons grind. ‘Phew… How you holding up, Beverly?’

He and Price look towards their Alpha boss, and find her gaze distant as she stares at the ID photographs of the Omegas pinned to the board on the far wall.

Looking into the faces of dead mates, Beverly’s chest tightens at the thought of her own Omega. Saul has just taken up cookery lessons… The Omega wants to improve the way he cares for her, turning the food she provides for him into a masterpiece.

She knows what she needs to do…

***

Sitting in the private interview room at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Will waits quietly to see who has come to visit him. Not Alana again, not so soon after her last session… Not Hannibal; he would want to see him in his cell…

When the door buzzes and the guard opens it, Will glances up and around… And his heart skips a beat. Beverly Katz walks into the room, her body thrumming with disapproval, eyes flickering red as she takes in his prison jumpsuit and shackled hands. She places her leather jacket and work bag on the floor beside her chair across the table from him, and Will feels his eyes pulse gold in response to her familiar scent.

‘It’s good to see you,’ he says softly. He really means it; he’s always liked Beverly. Always had a lot of respect for her, as a colleague and as an Alpha.

Beverly manages a smile, though it quickly fades.

‘Don’t how I feel about seeing *you*,’ she admits. ‘I’ll let you know when I do.’

Will nods once, accepting this. Frowns in confusion.

‘Does Jack know you’re here?’

‘No, but he shouldn’t be surprised,’ Beverly replies. Will huffs a tiny laugh.

‘*I’m* surprised.’

‘I’m… *compartmentalizing*,’ Beverly says. She clears her throat and reaches for her bag. ‘There are a lot of Omegas missing.’

And there it is. Will’s shadow raises its head, flicking its tongue to taste the air even as his heart sinks.

‘Ah.’ He nods. Of course. She’s not here to see *him*. Not *Will* the Omega, or Will the man, but Will the Empath. Will the Killer. *God*... It *hurts*… It’s terrifying… The dark current, a

swamp in his mind now, threatening to drown him again… 'You have the file with you?' he asks, looking off to the side, clenching his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering.

Beverly can see the Omega trembling, smell the salty fear and spicy pain in his scent, and guilt flares. But other Omegas are dying, already dead, because of this killer…

'Yes,' she says.

Will nods again, a jerky movement. *Breathe… Breathe…* He can do this… He can make himself look. Make himself feel the resonances, to understand them and sink into the shadow…

'And *pictures?*' he asks, staring into her face, his vision fading behind a cloud of darkness. Beverly glances up, hands busy pulling out the manila envelope, and sees the detached blankness wash over Will's gentle Omegan features… He looks… *dangerous*.

'Yes.' She hands over the glossy A4 photographs of the river bodies. 'The first six bodies were found in the same place,' she explains. 'Dumped in a river. Caught in a beaver dam.'

Will nods, taking a slow, shaky breath, his hands twitching as he looks. As he studies the pictures of bloated, dead Omegas… *Omegas just like me…*

'What's he do to them?' he asks, his voice wobbling.

'He targets them, follows them home, abducts them…' Beverly looks sick. 'And *preserves* them.'

Will purses his lips, a bitter taste in his mouth.

'You wanna know how he's choosing them, don't you?'

'Thought you would have some ideas,' Beverly admits. She pulls out another stack of photographs, these smaller. 'These are DMV and Omegan Registry pictures of Omegas who are still missing under similar circumstances from three different states.'

As she talks, the Alpha displays the photographs on the table before Will, in three long rows. A dozen Omegan faces stare up at him, all different colors and shapes, but all with the classic gold ring around the iris, doe eyes and soft features. All pretty. All gentle.

'Tell me what you see.'

What do you see?

A whisper… A tickle of something… Will allows himself to fade, pieces of his mask dropping away as the darkness inside him gathers itself. It's stronger now… Takes him over more completely…

I don't see them as mates… Their bodies are not what matters… It's their skin I'm after…

His chain rasping through the ring bolted to the table, Will begins to arrange the pictures. He can see it… His hands move of their own accord, driven by his shadow… The current is warm, lapping at his ankles… Feather-light kisses on the back of his neck, Hannibal's lips caressing his crest…

Less than a minute later, he sits back, the spell broken. Looks down at his handiwork, breathing deeply, and he *knows*.

He *understands*.

'It's a color palette.'

***

Dinner at the hospital is served between six and seven o'clock. Will's cell is in Ward C, housing violent offenders, and his primary orderly is a wiry young Alpha called Matthew Brown. After Beverly's visit, Matthew is the one who enters the interview room and exchanges the long-chained cuffs for smaller shackles. He is gentle with Will, stroking down his arms to guide them behind his back, purring softly when Will complies.

'Steak tonight,' he murmurs, resting a thumb over Will's pulse-point as he walks him back to his cell. 'I'll make sure you get a good sized piece.'

Will ignores him, fighting down a shudder at Matthew's heavy musk. Unwanted touching from another Alpha causes his skin to erupt in a prickling rash, and he can't help but listen to his instincts; everything in him screams that Matthew is *wrong*, that he shouldn't be anywhere near him.

'Here you go,' Matthew croons, placing Will into his cage and locking the door. Will backs up to the bars and waits for Matthew to unhook the handcuffs, biting his tongue to suppress a growl at the young Alpha's lingering stroke over his clenched palms.

Hannibal will kill you for touching me.

'See you later, Will.'

Turning from the cell door, Will waits until Matthew's footsteps have faded before he moves. He rubs at the stinging skin on his hands and wrists, lifting his palms to rasp his tongue over them. It's not as soothing as if Hannibal were to lick him, but his saliva is better than water for reducing the angry red bumps. After a liberal coating of spit, he wipes his hands through his hair and slides them down his neck, covering himself in his own scent in an attempt to drown out Matthew's lingering musk.

He has no clock, but by the standard routine, he estimates an hour before dinner.

Sinking to his mattress, Will rests back against the cold stone of the wall and draws his knees up, hugging them close. Bows his head, feeling the rough cotton of the prison jumpsuit to rasp against his swollen crest, and rests his forehead on his legs.

Breathe in for three, out for five…

He can't stop thinking about the stolen Omegas… The dead bodies… Dead Omegas, floating like scum in a river… Caught in a beaver dam… Kidnapped and killed, coated in resin…

My paints… My canvas…

His darkness twists inside him, writhing and rising to flood his veins with tar. Will shivers, pain crackling up and down his spine.

'What you need is a way out of dark places when Jack sends you there.'

Hannibal's voice in his mind. Hannibal's voice *is* his mind… He *is* Hannibal… Hannibal's Omega… His other half.

One half of an arch cannot stand.

A tear trickles down his cheek, soaking into the fabric on his knees. He listens to the thump of his heartbeat, the rasp of breath in and out of his lungs… The tiny clicks of his blinking eyes…

I can't get you out of my head…

His chest is tender, and his drawn up knees dig into the swollen pectorals.

Fucking Jack and his fucking gunshot.

Will rolls his tongue between his teeth. Memories of his childhood trickle through his mind. Long summer days, hazy because he was so young… The taste of his mom's bourbon pecan pie… His mouth waters and his belly rumbles. God, he's not had that in *years*, but he'd *kill* for a slice right now. And a Café du Monde hot chocolate with marshmallows and whipped cream…

He has *no* interest in the rubbery reconstructed offal they call steak here. Even *without* being treated to Hannibal's fine dining, Will knows he'd struggle to swallow the prison food. He'd rather starve, but no doubt Dr Chilton would *love* any excuse to hook him up to a monitor and manipulate his crest until he was compliant. *'For his own good*.'

Fuck.

Panic swarms his vision with grey spots, buzzing in his ears like a wasp. Will's heart races and he has to sit back, staring at the dark ceiling in an attempt to loosen the vice snapped tight around his chest.

Fuck… Fuck… He can't do this… He can't do this…

'Han-'

He bites his lip hard enough to draw blood and screws his eyes tightly shut. *No*. He will *not* call for his Alpha. For that *monster*.

Forcing himself to breathe slowly, Will clears his mind and conjures up his image of the stream. The winter river appears, cold water rushing between his legs as he wades ever deeper into the current. Birds whistle in the air around him, and dragonflies zip past, darting through the curling mist rising in the first rays of warm morning sun. The raven stag grazes on the far bank, clever obsidian eyes watching him, guarding him from the dangers of the forest. Will loosens the line of his fishing rod and flicks his wrist back and forth, getting the right movement, hearing the lure whistle before it lands with barely a lick on the surface…

When Matthew returns with the food at seven, Will is utterly calm, and accepts his food quietly. It is as unappealing as ever; a cheap white roll, stewed green beans, lumpy mash and a 'steak' made of reconstructed beef products, accompanied by a plastic mug of apple juice, and he can't help but sigh when he sees it.

He *has* to eat at least some of it; Dr Chilton is *very* concerned with his nausea. So, bracing himself for a grisly mouthful, Will picks up his plastic cutlery and saws off a chunk of meat. Takes a deep, steadying breath, and places it in his mouth.

Omegas, like Alphas, are hedonists, and their senses are more than three times as sharp as a Beta's. When the steak patty touches his tongue, his senses explode and Will can taste every chemical, feel every bit of gristle and fat. Sickness rises, but he chews resolutely, determined to swallow at least *one* piece.

He's choking…

Hannibal would be so disgusted by this dinner.

Hannibal… The thought sparks a memory, fuzzy at first but growing sharper as Will stills. Hannibal holding him up as he fights… Releasing him to run through the wild forest… Will's body, soaked with sweat and steaming in the cold air… A strangled howl as he darts between the trees…

His Alpha, pouncing out of nowhere as Will trips and falls. Their mouths meeting in a clash of teeth and lips that smears blood between them. Hannibal raking bloody welts across the creamy flesh of Will's belly and chest, marking him as *his*. As *owned*. Hannibal sucking his endless hardness, rolling slick-wet balls between his cold fingers as Will bucks and cries beneath him, torn apart by pleasure so sharp it almost hurts.

And then Hannibal speaking, his voice thick with a rut-rasp, blazing crimson eyes glowing like embers as he kneels over him. Protecting him from the world.

'I love you like this. Roll over, Will.'

Hannibal, taking Will, sinking into his inferno-hot body, again and again, making Will *howl* as he comes harder than ever before… He'd been in full Heat, his body desperate to breed, utterly overwhelmed by his Alpha.

Willing to do anything…

Time shifts. There's a gap, a shudder and then they're in the house. Will's house… Hannibal is leaning over him, his face upside down as he sits Will up in a chair. Will is naked, still hard and smeared with blood, his arms and legs covered in mud, muscles twitching as heat chases cold chases heat up and down his spine, settling like fire and ice in his crest.

And Hannibal… Hannibal is wearing a plastic suit, completely covering his clothing, hands and shoes…

You leave no trace…

'Open your mouth for me, Will… That's it. Wider. Wider. Good.'

Hannibal, his *Alpha*, forcing a hollow plastic feeding tube down Will's throat… Hannibal *purring* his encouragement and praise as Will obeys him…

'That's very good, Will. You're mine. That's it. I've got you. Now, I want you to take this for me.' Hannibal holds up an *ear*, a *severed ear*, *Abigail's ear*, and Will can see the light through the tear in the flesh… His Alpha wants him to swallow it for him… Hannibal is wearing gloves, and uses a wire to insert the ear down the feeding tube, directly into Will's stomach…

'You don't have to taste it. This will make it easier for you.'

And then pain, ripping pain as Hannibal tugs the tube from his throat… Will chokes and gasps, retching as he falls forwards and grabs for Hannibal's chest. Whimpering, seeking comfort… Assurance…

Hannibal strokes his sweaty hair, pushing damp curls back from his flushed face. Doesn't kiss him, or touch him with his bare skin… Just hugs him close and allows Will to snuggle up to the plastic suit… Allows Will to rock his erection against his thigh, seeking relief.

'Alpha…'

Oh God.

Will retches, splattering his tray with bits of half-chewed beef and *Abigail's ear*, just like the morning he'd thrown it up into his sink…

The ear he threw up…

The ear *Hannibal made him throw up…*

'They haven't found her body.'

He shudders, tears welling in gold-bright eyes. Fear swarms him, crashing through him and shattering him.

It *hurts*. The betrayal… The manipulation…

His *Alpha* killed Abigail, cut off her ear and force-fed it to him so that *he* would be convicted of the murder.

Hannibal set him up. His *Alpha* set him up for murder, *knowing* where Will would end up… Knowing it could end with a death penalty…

Setting his tray down as far away from him as possible, Will curls around himself on the cot and covers his head with his blanket. A meagre nest, unable to comfort him or make him feel safe. He can hear the strangled mewls bubbling up from his throat, the high, desperate, whimpers as he calls for help, for comfort and protection…

'Omega! O-*MEGA!'*

An Alpha's howl rises from the far end of the corridor, accompanied by the clattering of a thrown tray, a body bashing against the bars of a cell and the clatter of a flipped bedframe. All the Alphas are calling now, some screaming, others screeching obscenities… All, in some form or another, offering to care for him.

Will hugs his arms tight around his shaking body, stuffing his blanket into his mouth and biting down hard to gag himself. He doesn't want any other Alpha to touch him… He doesn't want drugs, or an orderly, or Dr Chilton…

He wants *Hannibal*...

And he wants to *kill* Hannibal.

How could he ever forgive him for this?

***

Saturday morning is spent in the office, preparing for court on Monday, so Jack is wearing a suit when he arrives at Will's farmhouse in Wolf Trap. The weather is nice today, and he appreciates the chance to enjoy the fresh breeze and sunshine filtering down through the tall trees around the property. This part of Virginia is beautiful all year, but especially when the sky is a frosty blue and scattered with wispy clouds.

He has Will's key from evidence, and the front door swings away from him with a rattle of the brass handle as Jack steps inside.

The house is cold and empty.

Abandoned.

Mismatched furniture; two different armchairs collected from yard sales, an old piano, a threadbare couch… Will's fold-down bed, the bedding removed; most of the Omega's personal affects tagged and gathering dust in FBI evidence lockers.

Jack's eyes skim over Will's desk, empty now of fishing equipment and the infamous lures. He sighs as he removes his sunglasses, pausing for a moment with his gaze on the view from Will's window, of flat, empty fields… Flat, empty sky…

Empty… It's all empty…

He's taken a step closer to the kitchen when he hears a dog whining, and Jack turns at once. Returns to the front porch and sees Will's brown collie-cross sitting near the welcome mat. Waiting. Always waiting.

'Hi, Winston,' he says softly. Crouches before the latest addition to the Omega's pack and lets Winston sniff his hand before petting him. 'Come here, boy. There you go.' He sighs, carding his fingers through Winston's thick fur. 'Suppose you blame me too, huh?'

When Alana arrives forty minutes later, she finds Jack and Winston on Will's bare mattress, the dog curled up by the Alpha's side, the Alpha hunched forwards propping his chin up on a hand as dark eyes stare into space.

'Hello, Jack.'

She smiles sadly, understanding and sympathy in her blue eyes, and closes the front door to ward off the worst of the chill. Jack sits a little straighter as the Beta approaches, and nods down to Winston as he says,

'You need to take better care of this dog, or let Hannibal have him.'

Will would be devastated if anything were to happen to Winston.

'Mm.' Alana nods, and sinks onto the end of the bed. 'I feel horrible.' She fusses Winston's scruff as the collie shifts to offer them both his affection. 'I got all the dogs chipped, but at least they're not running away to anywhere I can't find 'em.'

'He's just looking for Will,' Jack murmurs, leaning down to kiss Winston's head. He really is an adorable dog… Perhaps he should get Bella a companion… 'Hm? Yeah…'

'Isn't that why *you're* here?' Alana asks, tilting her head at Jack. She sees the sadness etched into the lines of his face, making him look every one of his forty-three years, and Jack sighs as he nods.

'Listen,' he says, his voice quiet. Resigned. 'I *understand* why you felt you had to file that report.' He twists his hands together for want of something to do. 'You questioned my judgment when it needed to be questioned.'

Alana nods, blue eyes flashing.

'Yes, it did.'

'And it will help in Will's defense, if it's in the record,' Jack asks, to which Alana huffs and rolls her eyes in frustration.

'Declaring Hannibal's guilt is more important to Will than establishing his own defense,' she growls.

Jack shakes his head at the Omega's misguided rage.

‘Hannibal’s not guilty.’

‘Neither is Will,’ Alana reminds him, and she catches his eye when Jack looks at her again. ‘But he’s *clinging* to the hope that Hannibal did this, so he doesn’t have to face what he did.’

Jack clenches his jaw, feeling his eyes prickle as they flash red.

‘*Convince* me he didn’t know what he was doing,’ he says, a rasp of growl catching in his throat. ‘I would *really* like to be convinced, Alana.’

Seeing an opening, Alana turns, sitting more on the mattress so she can lean forwards and pierce him with her gaze.

‘A psychopath wouldn’t be so *scared* of the truth, Jack.’ When the Alpha looks away, she tries again. ‘Will’s *terrified*, but that’s not stopping him from trying to find it!’

Chewing his tongue, Jack squashes down the anger swirling in his chest and returns to fussing the dog. A calming distraction.

‘Somebody’s gotta find the truth, eh, Winston?’ he murmurs.

Alana sighs, picking at the old polish flaking from her nails. A strand of dark hair falls over her shoulder and she smells her rose shampoo. Remembers the night Will kissed her; he’d been *so* hot, and he’d smelled *so* good… She should have stayed to help him…

‘If Will doesn’t remember what he did…’ She pauses, her lower lip wobbling as she fights tears. Fights the rising despair as she thinks of how *stubborn* the Omega is. ‘… He’ll never accept the truth.’

***

Birdsong wavers in the still air around him. Will casts the line again, sailing the lure a dozen meters downstream to the crop of rocks causing the current to swirl. It’s a good area for trout; they like to hide between the stones, to catch their prey as it slips past… That’s how he’ll catch them.

His old fishing jacket is warm, and the cold water buffeting his waders feels good. He loves the combination of temperatures. Loves feeling the pebbles shift beneath his feet as he sinks, ever deeper, into the riverbed.

‘*Will…?’*

Jack’s voice, calling to him from a great distance… Will looks over. Sees the Alpha standing on the riverbank, a frown drawing his eyebrows together.

‘Will?’ Jack repeats. He sounds worried…

The river disappears, and Will opens his eyes. He’s back in the cell, dark and dank and smelling like mold, his skin burning from the newly washed prison jumpsuit because he’s reacting badly to the detergent…

‘Hey, Will.’ Relief loosens Jack’s chest and allows his heart to beat again when the Omega returns to the present, turning only his head to look at him and offer a single, bitter smile as his eyes flicker gold in the gloom.

‘Hi, Jack.’

‘Where were you just now?’ Jack asks, nodding towards Will’s perfectly still body, stood in the middle of the cell.

‘Gone fishin’,’ Will quips. ‘What are *you* doing here?’

‘I needed to remind myself of who you once were,’ Jack replies, taking a step closer to the bars. He adopts a classic Alpha stance; legs spread, hands in his pockets, shoulders squared. Dominant and powerful. Will senses nerves … Jack is overcompensating for his fear. ‘Y’know,’ the Alpha adds. ‘That man whose classroom I walked into months ago.’

‘I remember that man,’ Will agrees. Does nothing to hide the tremble of anger in his voice as he gestures around him. ‘*Memories* are all I have.’ He sucks in a breath, raising his eyes to the ceiling to keep the tears from spilling as pain stabs at his heart. ‘Imagine how *nice* it is to *stumble* on a new one…?’

Jack remains silent, watching from below furrowed brows, and Will’s voice drops to a whisper. He *has* to make him understand… Please… *Someone* has to believe him…

‘I was *almost* certain Hannibal Lecter did this to me… And it’s a funny thing; doubt.’ He gasps a laugh, ignoring the wetness rolling down his cheeks. ‘I had nothing to prove to myself, or… or *anyone* else that Hannibal was responsible… not even a *memory*.’

Jack nods slowly, giving nothing away.

‘Do you have something now?’ he asks, and Will nods, excitement thickening the ring of gold around his blue eyes. ‘You’ve recovered a memory?’

‘Yes,’ Will whispers.

‘That’s meaningless,’ Jack replies.

‘Not to *me*,’ Will snarls, and his anger unlocks his legs. He strides up to the bars, keeping his voice low and fervent as he continues, ‘He did it *so* well… And, and there wasn’t an *orgy* of evidence,’ he reminds him. ‘There was *just enough* to convince *you*.’

Jack growls a warning, not bothering to hide the flash of red in his eyes.

‘*We* investigated your claims about Dr Lecter, Will. *Thoroughly*. We went over every fiber of every stitch of clothing. We took his DNA! We took his fingerprints… We found *nothing*.’

‘You let the fox into the henhouse,’ Will replies, draping his arms through the bars of the cell door.

‘You stood over Cassie Boyle’s body in that field and you described *yourself* to me,’ Jack retorts.

‘No, I described *Hannibal Lecter*,’ Will snaps.

‘I can’t *hear* this anymore!’ Jack says. ‘He is your *Alpha*, Will! You *belong* to him!’

Will opens his mouth to argue, hesitates and closes it again. Sighs, blowing his frustration through his nose even as his stomach churns at the reminder of his double imprisonment.

God… Jack, come on…!

‘I am *not* the intelligent psychopath you’re *looking* for.’

He waits, staring at Jack, trembling as the fire dims behind the Alpha’s eyes. The shutters come down and he watches as the Alpha retreats behind the walls of everything he knows. He’s lost him. Again.

‘Goodbye, Will,’ Jack mutters, turning and striding down the corridor to the exit. Leaving Will in this dank hellhole, alone.

‘You may not believe me now!’ Will calls, risking punishment for raising his voice after the retreating man. ‘But you *will!*’

I just hope it isn’t too late.

***

A fire crackles in the hearth, casting shadows across the silent office. Saturday is his busiest day, and Hannibal has been looking forward to the appointment with his Omega in the evening. What had started as 7.30pm on a Thursday quickly became 7.30pm on Saturdays, Mondays and Thursdays… And then every evening in between, at either of their homes. But the standing “therapy” appointments were his favorite times to see Will; to engage in animated discussions about philosophy, religion and psychology… Will had challenged his every move, creating an intricate game of chess between them.

That game is over, now. Checkmate…

Hannibal sits in his armchair, staring at the empty seat across from him. He could imagine Will there; draw from his memory palace to create a lifelike imitation with blazing blue-gold eyes, curling brown hair and sharp jaw… He could recall every one of their conversations, savoring Will’s sharp retorts and acid comebacks… His Omega had always been refreshingly simple; not one for pretense or fuss, yet willing to indulge Hannibal’s more ostentatious habits…

He doesn’t. He sits alone, reminding himself of Will’s absence.

Hannibal studies his emotions, seeking clarity on the pressure in his lungs, the vice around his heart and the spinning thoughts in his mind. Sitting alone in the office, with only the pops

of the fire to break the silence, the stinking dungeons of his earliest memories threaten to consume him. Why?

Blood on the snow… A little deer with an arrow in its side…

Why does he feel this weight on his shoulders? This gnawing sorrow?

Will is suffering. Hannibal knows this. Knows that his Omega's physical pain is only going to worsen with each day that he remains separated from his Alpha. But pain can be overcome. It can be managed, and neither of them are strangers to the concept…

Is this how it feels to miss someone?

He still misses his sister. Still feels a stab of ice in his heart when he dreams of her. This is different.

'You *regret* what you did to me,' Will says, and Hannibal flinches. Looks up and sees his mate sat across from him, dressed in his prison jumpsuit, hair growing shaggy and eyes blazing gold with righteous fury. 'You're feeling *guilty*, Hannibal.'

'Guilty?' Hannibal tilts his head, his lips curling into a smile to coax Will to anger. 'I never feel guilty for anything.'

Will doesn't reply, because Will is *not there*.

The chair is empty, and he is alone.

***

He's cold… So cold… Why is he so cold…?

His limbs are heavy. Oh, he remembers this feeling… *Heroin*… Did he get high and fall asleep on the street again?

No… He's been clean for years. His Alpha made sure of that…

Where am I?

Eugh, everything is sticky… His hand is on his face… Why… *Oh God*…

Panic flares when he tries to pull away, to move. It *hurts* – ripping layers of epidermis before he stops. No… *No*...

He's trapped… His heart falters, and then trips over itself in its haste to fuel his need to flee. He whimpers, barely able to part his stiff lips as the desperate mewls bubble up from his vice-tight chest.

Alpha… Alpha, please… God… Help me…

Wild eyes flick around the dark room. Circular walls… Sheets of metal… Sleeping bodies all around him… No, not sleeping… Not *breathing*…

Dead bodies all around me… I'm attached to corpses… A dozen dead Omegas…

He can't… He *can't* –

A whirring, whining buzz in his ears. Grey spots before his vision as his breath comes in shorter, sharper gasps. Shock. He's in shock. He's panicking. Overwhelmed with pure, feral *terror*.

He rips open his lips and screams at the stars winking through the opening high above him.

'HELP ME!'

Sakizuke

Chapter Summary

Captured Omega, Roland Umber, escapes from the grain silo, but is chased by the Alpha killer through a cornfield to the edge of a cliff, where he dies attempting to jump into the water below. The BAU team recovers his body but assume he was discarded and dumped like the others. Dr Bedelia Du Maurier ends her relationship with Hannibal, having come to the conclusion that he is dangerous. Beverly continues to seek Will's help with the case and, using photos of Roland's body, Will realizes that he had in fact escaped and was not discarded. In return for his help, Beverly promises to look into Will's possible innocence, and Kade Prurnell visits Will in the asylum to offer him the chance to avoid the death penalty in return for pleading guilty.

Chapter Notes

Hey peeps! Okay, so this chapter isn't as long as I expected, but I'd rather have it up and not quite as long, than labour over it for AGES and still not have it the same length! Call it natural variation.

I hope you enjoy! As always, sorry for typos!

TWO

Sakizuke

ALPHA! HELP ME!'

Panic claws at his chest, shrinking his lungs until he fights for breath. He has to get out of here. He has to escape… But how? He's trapped; his legs stuck together, arm trapped at his side, hand to his face, and fixed to the bodies, the *corpses* of the dead Omegas around him.

Okay… okay… This is going to hurt, but there's only one way out.

Skin heals. If he doesn't escape, he'll die.

Roland Umber has two children, and he had live births for both. He's no stranger to pain. But ripping his own thighs apart, tearing great chunks of flesh from glistening muscle, draws a

sobbing scream from his throat. His mind spins and the room fades into darkness for a moment as he loses consciousness…

Awake again.

Not free yet. Pain is temporary. His life is at stake.

He can't hesitate. If he hesitates, the pain will be too great, the fear too strong, and he'll give up.

Roland yanks his arm up, ignoring the *sound* of stretching, splitting skin. He'll be grotesque, but he'll be alive. He lets himself scream again, lets himself cry, sweat mixing with tears on his face as his eyes glow gold, the white sclera bloodshot as capillaries burst under pressure.

Terror drives him, spiking adrenaline through him in sharp waves. He pulls forward, ready to heave himself to his feet, and agony flares again. *Fuck, no*… He's *sewn* up to the body beside him. Sewn to the *corpse* beside him…

Fuck this shit. Fuck this… Fuck this, I'm getting home. I'm getting to Tara, to my kids…

An image of his Alpha floats before his eyes, and Roland clenches his teeth hard enough to make his ears ring. Hauls himself away from the dead Omega, howling as the coarse thread pulls taut, refusing to snap. No, no, come *on…!*

His skin gives first, coming away from his side in a great swath. *FUCK*… The pain is so sharp, so all-consuming, that he has to take a moment just to *breathe*, sucking cold, foul-smelling air deep into his shrivelled lungs.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck…

Home. He has to get home. He has to get out of here. Just a little longer, and he'll be safe…

Clinging to his belief and shivering from cold and shock, Roland wobbles his way between the curled bodies of the lifeless Omegas around him. Hits the door of the grain silo and snarls when he hears the clatter of a padlock.

NO.

Bashing against the metal with his uninjured shoulder, the desperate Omega falls out into the freezing night when the door gives beneath his weight. Sharp rocks slash the soles of his feet and he stumbles, his blood steaming in the bitter air.

Gasping, fighting the paralyzing numbness creeping up his legs, Roland staggers towards the cars parked near the edge of the cornfield. Headlights flare and he freezes, staring into the blinding light. A breeze carries with it the smell of an Alpha… Familiar… *A hint of resin, copper… the bitter stink of rut…*

That Alpha is dangerous.

Roland ducks into the shadows between rusted old vehicles, his heart hammering loud enough to deafen him. Another rock cuts his toes and he falls, crying out as the movement widens the tears in his broken flesh.

The Alpha is out of his truck now, a rifle in hand, swinging a flashlight between the cars to find him. Roland's eyes flood gold, enhancing his sight, but he can see the glow of crimson in the man's face; rut-red eyes, equally enhanced.

He has to hide.

Leaning back, trying to keep the Alpha in his line of sight, Roland's thigh muscle trembles and gives out on him, dropping his flayed back against the rusted metal of a truck door. The moment he cries in pain, he knows he's given away his location, and climbs *inside* the car beside him.

Please… Please… Please let me get away… Please let me get home…

He can feel the desperate whimpers and mewls bubbling up in his throat. His scent glands have swollen, enhancing his Omegan Voice, designed to trigger the nurturing, protective instincts of Alphas, but that won't save him now, and he needs to stay silent.

Dashing through the rows of corn, he hears a door open – no doubt the car he was hiding in moments before…

Please… please…

Dodging rows of corn, his breathing labored and body getting weaker by the minute, Roland hunkers down and watches the beam of light two rows across from him.

Yes… that's it… Lose me, you sick motherfucker…

Darkness. The bulb glows orange before fading, the flashlight switched off. Quiet footsteps, too faint for him to place over the rushing of his pulse…

Light blinds him, and he hears the triumphant growl of the stalking Alpha.

FUCK.

Roland spins, drawing on the last of his energy, the last of his fear-triggered adrenaline to sprint for freedom. One last, desperate attempt to get away alive. Flailing, tilting forwards as pain overwhelms him, he can hear sweat and tears and blood splattering the corn leaves around him. The Alpha is right behind, jogging low, snarling as he runs. The perfect predator.

Breaking from the cornfield, Roland stumbles, nearly falling. Manages to right himself and pelts for the scrub at the edge of the clearing.

A shot rings out, the bullet sinking deep into the trunk of the tree barely an inch from his head and shattering bark over him. Roland yelps, the uniquely Omegan sound hovering in the frigid winter air beneath a blanket of stars.

He's crying now, panting and gasping. He's slowing down, exhausted and in too much pain to keep going. Mewls and whimpers stutter past swollen lips, his Alpha's name caught on his tongue.

And then the ground falls away from him and Roland realizes he's reached the edge of a cliff. Meters below, a river rushes past, cold and dark and dangerous…

He can't swim well… But there's a chance he'll survive… He *definitely* won't survive if the Alpha catches him.

Turning, Roland takes one last look at the man who wants to kill him, the man with glowing red eyes, shaggy blond hair and a *gun* raised to fire, and jumps.

Tara…

Skidding to a halt on the edge of his land, Alpha James Gray readies his gun and peers over the cliff. The wavering beam of his flashlight skids over jagged rocks, foaming water and then…

His heart sinks when he sees his final piece, the perfect cocoa Omega, dead in the water, his skull split open from the fall. Water laps at his body, cradling it close, and then drags it downstream.

He'll have to find a replacement.

***

Monday at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Breakfast is a miserable tray of lumpy porridge, a piece of dry toast, bitter black coffee and a pot of fruit in saccharine syrup, which is a jarring combination that hurts his fillings.

A fat Beta Orderly stays to watch him eat, his piggy little eyes trained on the Omega's face as Will forces down each spoonful of watery oats. It's his first exposure to the elusive 'gentler sex', and he wants to take as much time to savor this moment as possible. No doubt the Alpha, Matthew Brown, will be along soon to shoo him along and take over.

'You have visitors today,' the Beta says. 'Your *Alpha* and Dr Bloom…'

Will doesn't reply. He has nothing to say to that piece of news. He knows Alana is still trying to convince him of his guilt, and, in doing so, build a defense case for him. The poor little Omega, mad with Heat hormones and pseudo-bonded to the psychopath, Garrett Jacob Hobbs… Unable to control himself. A slave to his biology.

'You're looking pale, Will,' the Beta continues, stroking a pudgy up and down the bar of the cell door. 'Perhaps seeing your Alpha again will *perk* you up.'

He chuckles, baring his teeth in a grin. Leans even closer and adds, in a whisper,

'Hey, wanna know why an Omega has legs?' His chuckle makes Will's stomach clench, and he pauses eating, making the mistake of glancing up. The Beta winks. 'So that he doesn't

leave a trail like a snail.'

Biting his tongue to keep from saying or doing something he'll be made to regret, Will very deliberately sets the half-eaten breakfast tray down on the cot beside him.

'You done?' the Beta asks, raising his eyebrows in surprise. 'Okay… Suppose you want to save your appetite for your Alpha, huh?'

'This isn't your ward, Karl.'

Matthew Brown's voice, soft and rusty from disuse, freezes the fat Orderly in place. Will stands, his eyes flashing gold as he looks beyond the Beta's round shoulder to see the compact man behind him. As uncomfortable as Matthew makes him, the mild-mannered and respectful Alpha is far preferable to this slobbery heap of failure, and Will offers Matthew a tiny quirk of his lips as thanks for stepping in and rescuing him.

The Beta waddles away as quickly as he can, muttering under his breath about Alphas thinking they rule the world just because they can pop a knot, and Matthew jangles the keys on his ring, grinning at Will.

'Want a shower?'

The shower room at the hospital is tiled in grey from ceiling to floor, and comes equipped with bolted rings in the walls to secure patients as they are bathed. Matthew handcuffs Will through the gap in the cell door, gently tugging on the steel to check the tightness before taking Will by the elbow and leading him to the washroom. Will gets a shower every Monday and Thursday, and makes do with water from his sink in between. This will be his third shower since his incarceration.

'Here.' Matthew releases Will's right arm from the cuffs, leaving it dangling as he undresses. The middle cubicle has the best water pressure and the steadiest temperature, and he always chooses this one for his Omegan charge.

He waits quietly behind him as Will opens the poppers of his jumpsuit and toes off his prison loafers, only reaching out when Will offers him the clothing. The t-shirt is next, causing the handcuff chain to clink as it passes through the sleeve. Once he's bare-chested, Matthew secures the cuff to the ring bolted to the wall, leaving Will to one-handedly remove his boxers.

Gritting his teeth against the lack of privacy, Will twists the dial of the shower and concentrates on the water pelting against his skin. He tilts his face up into the hot spray and closes his eyes, feeling the droplets thrash his eyelids. His hair needs cutting, but he doubts it's going to happen anytime soon. He wets it, keeping his back to Matthew even though that means showing him his crest…

'Here, I got you some Omega shampoo,' Matthew murmurs, extending a small bottle of sensitive shampoo and conditioner for Will to take. 'Should reduce the itch.'

Will nods his thanks and takes the offering. Working silently, he squeezes an amount straight onto his scalp and works as good a lather as he can with his one hand. Lets the suds rinse down his face and body before turning off the water.

‘Here.’ Matthew drapes one towel around Will’s shoulders, careful of the ridged scar, and hands him another to pat himself dry with. Will half-turns to face him, watching the way Matthew’s eyes flicker red as they take in his wet muscles before lowering in an almost *reverential* gesture.

Fresh boxers and t-shirt stick to his damp skin, and Will struggles with his clean jumpsuit before giving up with a sigh and gesturing for Matthew to help him. The Alpha crouches before him, helping him into the loafers and then smoothing the thick cotton trousers up Will’s legs, without pressing his advantage. Whilst not wanted, it’s a nice change from the Beta orderlies who openly stare and use every opportunity to grope him.

‘Dr Chilton asked me to take you to the visitor’s room when we’re done here,’ Matthew says, as soft and hoarse as ever. ‘Do you need anything before we go?’

‘I’m fine,’ Will mutters, adjusting the parts of the jumpsuit he can reach by himself. Matthew nods, and rises to stand before him. They’re very close, practically the same height, and there’s a moment where Will wonders what would happen if the Alpha were to lean in and kiss him… How badly would it hurt? What if Matthew were to touch his crest? Would he vomit, or would his body make slick?

He doesn’t find out, though. Matthew smiles, his eyes glittering, and uncuffs Will’s hand from the wall. Helps him feed his arm through the sleeves of t-shirt and jumpsuit, and then cuffs Will’s hands behind his back again. Buttons him up and straightens out his collar in a sick parody of the time Hannibal had tied his bowtie that night they went to the opera.

‘You look perfect, Will.’

Hannibal’s voice in his head, so clear…

Will swallows the lump in his throat, closing his eyes against the pain of the memory. Feels Matthew’s gentle pressure urging him to walk ahead of him and gives himself over to the act of walking. One foot in front of the other, rubber soles squeaking on the tiles, Velcro crunching. Not thinking about where he’s going and who he’s going to see.

He knows what he needs to do.

Research shows that bonded Omegas can survive for months without their mates, but that their health steadily declines after the first forty-eight hours of physical contact. Headaches, nausea and abdominal cramps are some of the initial symptoms.

For the Alphas, symptoms are recorded as being much less sever – melancholy, a general feeling of restlessness… Irritation.

Standing beside Alana Bloom in the visitor’s room of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Hannibal can track each of these feelings throughout his body, as well as a

tight neck, headache and acid reflux, something he never suffered from before pair-bonding with Will Graham. His discomfort, however, is nothing compared to the pain he can see on Will's face; his Omega is drawn, pale and shaking behind the bars of the cage, hunched over himself with hands limp on his thighs.

Will is freshly showered; Hannibal can smell remnants of a generic-brand Omegan shampoo, and the lingering trace of what is presumably an Alpha Orderly. He represses the prickle in his eyes, refusing to allow them to glow red at the cloying stench on *his* mate.

'Hello, Will,' he says softly, sharp eyes catching the way Will still quivers and fights the urge to relax at the sound of his voice. 'How are you feeling?'

'Like I've lost the plot,' Will replies, his voice flat and heavy with exhaustion. With defeat.

That's good, Will. Once you stop fighting, you can work through the pain and emerge all the stronger on the other side. I'm waiting for you.

Will takes a deep breath, shedding his defenses like a snakeskin to reveal the true extent of his vulnerability.

'I am the *unreliable* narrator of my own story,' he says. All that doubt, that desperate *need* for his Alpha… Will pours it all into his voice, letting the rich, soothing scent of Hannibal flood his eyes gold and draw a low whine from his throat.

'You have an incomplete self,' Alana says, blue eyes soft with pity. 'There are pieces of you… you can't see.'

Will nods, his brow furrowed.

'I'm afraid to see,' he admits. He lowers his gaze from Hannibal's concerned expression, searching the air particles for answers. 'I don't know who I am anymore.' Another pause. A swallow… 'And… I'm afraid.'

To his credit, Hannibal refrains from stepping forward, but his body language adjusts as he fights the urge to go to his mate, to wrap him in his arms and comfort him.

'Without remembering, you're seized by something imagined,' he says, and Will scoffs, blinking away tears.

'I don't know which is worse,' he says. 'Believing that *I* did it… or, um…' He gulps past the lump choking him. Licks his lips. 'Believing that *you* did it. And…' He sees the red ring thicken around Hannibal's irises, and he knows his Alpha is using every ounce of self-restraint not to throw himself at the bars of the cage. '… did this *to* me.'

'Hannibal *isn't* responsible, Will.' Alana's voice is sharp behind the sympathy; she is frustrated with his constant accusations. However, she softens again when she adds, 'And neither are you. We have to get to the truth of what happened; it's the only way you can move forward.'

Will, staring off to the side, doesn't appear to notice the tears trickling down his cheeks; making no attempt to brush them away. Hannibal lowers his gaze, his heart squeezed in a fist of ice at the visual proof of his Omega's pain. As far as he is concerned, they are alone in the room – Alana is here as a formality, but she will leave soon. He will stay, and give Will what he needs… If he asks for it.

'I felt so betrayed by you,' Will whispers. He manages a wobbly smile and rolls his eyes at himself. 'Betrayal was the only thing that felt *real* to me.' His voice falters and he pauses again before he can continue. 'I *trusted* you.'

And there it is. The crux of the matter; Will gave himself to the Alpha *completely*, and Hannibal broke him… He succeeded. Now, he must put the pieces back together. He must make Will whole again.

Just as planned.

'And I *needed* to trust you,' Will whimpers, driving a dagger between Hannibal's ribs to sever his lungs. The air thins, and the Alpha feels himself spinning in freefall, momentarily unbalanced by the raw emotion crashing into him through their bond. Will's pain is so deep, so *consuming*… He'd had no idea he'd meant so much to the other man…

How much he *still* means…

Fuck.

'And you *can* trust me,' he promises, surprising himself by the *truth* of it. They are in this together, he and Will… Whatever it takes, he will fix this.

Will is gasping now, shivers spasming into full tremors that wrack his body. He hunches in on himself, his forehead shining with sweat and cheeks glistening with tears.

'I… I am *very*… I'm…' A rough exhale, trying to ground himself, and Will closes his eyes. 'I'm very confused.'

'Of course you are,' Alana says gently, but it is Hannibal who pleads with him.

'Will… Let us help you.' His throat seizes up and he stops, feeling his eyes concede to the itch of irises glowing red as emotion overwhelms him. 'Let *me* help you.'

The *sound* that escapes Will's mouth, so raw, so *Omegan*, makes Alana falter and lower her eyes. She is uncomfortable, fidgeting as Will nods and twists his hands together, shrinking down under the weight of his misery.

'I… I need your help,' he sobs, forcing his head up to beg Hannibal with bloodshot gold eyes. Grabs hold of the door, white-knuckled and shaking. 'Hannibal… Please…'

'I'm here, Will.' Hannibal hands his coat to Alana and approaches the cage, sliding his warm palm over Will's clammy hand. His Omega grips him painfully tight, jerking to his feet and pressing himself bodily against the metal in an effort to be closer. To be touching.

‘I’ll leave you two alone,’ Alana murmurs, and Hannibal tracks her receding footsteps. When the door clicks shut behind her, he reaches through the bars to wind his fingers through Will’s curls, massaging his scalp and cradling the back of his head to pull him into a kiss.

As soon as their lips meet, everything else falls away. Will moans, tasting salt as he opens his mouth to his Alpha’s tongue. He’s back in Hannibal’s kitchen, held safe in his Alpha’s arms, snow falling outside and nothing to disturb them. Hannibal’s strong grip on his head, moving around so that his thumb can trace the sharp line of his jaw, has Will dizzy with arousal. He rocks towards Hannibal’s crotch, reality kicking him in the gut when he feels the press of metal against his erection, separating them.

‘Alpha…’ His whisper is swallowed by Hannibal’s lips claiming his again. Hannibal pushes both arms through the cage and holds each side of Will’s face, his chest flush to the steel so that Will can feel his heat. Soak up his scent and find comfort.

‘I’ve got you,’ he murmurs, refusing to break the kiss, pressing the vow into his Omega’s mouth. ‘I’ve *got* you, Will. You’re *mine*.’

‘I miss you so much,’ Will gasps. He mimics Hannibal’s action and slides his arms through the cage door, clutching at his Alpha’s suit jacket. ‘It hurts… It *really* hurts.’

‘I know. I miss you, too.’ Hannibal peppers Will’s cheeks, forehead and eyelids with kisses, licking and brushing away his tears. He nuzzles against the scent glands in Will’s neck, purring into his ear, and Will shivers, tipping his head back to stare, sightless, at the mesh ceiling. He concentrates on the physical sensations; the rasp of his stubble against Hannibal’s smooth cheeks, the sharpness of teeth against his tender flesh and the hammering of his heart. Heat zings up his spine, settling as molten lava in his swollen crest, and slick dribbles down his thighs. He moans again, wanton, *knowing* Dr Chilton is listening, and lets himself mewl when Hannibal fixes his teeth under his jaw to suck and bite a bruise of ownership.

Fuck... Will tastes *so* good. His scent, even dulled, has thickened, smokier and heavier than ever, like a woodfire in the wilderness. He smells *alive*, deadly and *primal*, and Hannibal growls as he bangs against the door keeping them apart. He wants to tear this ugly jumpsuit from his Omega’s glorious body, lay him bare and ravage him until he is a symphony of bruises, welts and scratches. The world needs to see that this magnificent, deadly creature is *his*, and *his* alone. That Will *allows* him to mark him, to mount him, to mate him and fuck him, fill him with his seed and make him come screaming.

I love you.

Will flinches, whimpering when Hannibal’s teeth break the skin. He could have *sworn* he heard his Alpha’s voice, but Hannibal’s lips are still locked around his jugular. The taller man is purring again, muscles bunching and radiating heat as he rocks against the parts of Will he can reach. The padlocks on the door clang and Hannibal snarls, grabbing up fistfuls of Will’s prison suit before stroking over his back, his shoulders, his arms, touching all the parts of him as though afraid he’ll lose him if he lets go.

‘H-Hannibal…’ Will’s voice falters, and he settles for purring in response to his Alpha’s claim. He runs his hands up and down Hannibal’s back, winding his fingers through silky

blond hair and letting it tickle over his palms like water, copying Hannibal's gesture and massaging him.

Hannibal suckles on the bleeding teeth marks in Will's neck, relishing the sweet, coppery taste of him. It's different, almost syrupy now, and it is with great reluctance that he releases him. He caresses the fluttering pulse before licking up the length of Will's throat, pressing a final, lingering kiss on his mate's glistening lips. They both close their eyes, cherishing the short time they have left together, and then Hannibal steps back with a sigh.

Icy distance between them makes Will shiver, and he hugs his elbows as he sits back down. His knees feel weak, and he's lightheaded from the strength of the emotions ravaging his mind. Lust, fear, joy… *love?*

'I have to go,' Hannibal murmurs, fiddling with his tie and cufflinks. 'Do you feel better?'

Will nods, worrying his lower lip between his teeth. His eyes are still gold, but they are no longer wet, and his cheeks are flushed with color. He looks healthier, if miserable at the prospect of Hannibal leaving him.

'We need to stay close,' Hannibal continues, and smiles when Will glances up at him. 'I'll visit again soon.'

Another nod. Will swallows, unable to find the right words. Hannibal inclines his head, giving him space, and presses a final kiss to his fingertips, reaching through the bars to touch them, feather-light, on Will's cheek.

'Be safe, *mylimasis*.'

I do love you.

Escorted back to his cell by Matthew and a guard, Will does nothing to control the sobs hitching in his throat, and he sees the concern on the Orderly's face as the Beta guard shoves him, none-too-gently, into his room. Will backs up, offering them his hands to uncuff him, and then staggers to his cot. Falling onto the lumpy mattress, he hangs his head and covers his face as he continues to cry.

It isn't until the far door bangs shut, and silence descends, that his emotions drain away. Will hears his heartbeat, a slow, steady thump in his ears, and his shadow pulses in time to it, spreading out to fill every inch of his body with darkness.

It worked.

Alana thinks he is coming around. Getting better. It will make her easier to manage.

Hannibal might be more suspicious, but all Will needs from the Alpha right now is his scent. His touch. *His body*. He needs to sate the physical pain of his own biology in order to *think*. His nausea has subsided, his headache is gone and even his chest has loosened.

Now, he can *plan*.

***

Returning to his office, Hannibal finds it unusually difficult to settle to anything. He can smell Will on his hands, and taste him in his mouth, making him unwilling to eat or drink anything, even when the morning slips into afternoon and his stomach rumbles with hunger.

Will flinched when Hannibal's emotions overwhelmed him. Their bond, though half-formed, is strong. How powerful it could be if Will gave himself to Hannibal.

If Hannibal allowed Will to reciprocate a bite-bond…

A most dangerous act of devotion… To give myself to my Omega, to be at his mercy as surely as he is at mine… Only the most trusting partners engage in such a symmetrical relationship…

His thoughts are interrupted by a knock on his office door, and Hannibal frowns. He isn't expecting a patient for another hour.

Rising from his desk, he smooths out his suit jacket and tie, and reaches for the handle before his caller has to knock again.

Dr Bedelia Du Maurier stands on his threshold, cold Baltimore air still clinging to her flushed skin and blond hair, and Hannibal notes the pulse jumping at her throat.

He smiles down at her, and steps back to allow her entry.

'What a pleasant surprise.'

Bedelia walks into the office slowly, almost resignedly, as though expecting the worst. Hannibal closes the door behind her, noting the minute hitch of her breathing before she can stop herself.

Her Dior perfume does nothing to hide the salty tang of fear.

'Please, sit down,' Hannibal says, returning to his desk. He is unsurprised when Bedelia declines.

'I won't be staying long.'

Hannibal nods, and bends to check his diary, confirming to himself his next appointment with her tomorrow afternoon.

'I'm curious,' he says, giving her space by fixing his eyes on his slanted handwriting. 'What couldn't wait until our next session?'

'We don't *have* a next session,' Bedelia replies. Hannibal pauses, looking up in surprise. He falls perfectly still, noting the tension thrumming in his fellow Alpha's body. Bedelia is afraid, but by no means preparing to attack. No, this is… a flight response. Her hand clenches tightly around the handle of her bag, as though she longs to hold it before her like a shield. She is forcing herself to stand in a dominant Alpha pose; legs apart, shoulders back…

When he concentrates, Hannibal can hear the rapid tempo of her heart.

Very afraid.

‘I am no longer your therapist,’ Bedelia adds, and Hannibal allows his brows to draw together into a frown. His eyes, hidden behind the glow of the lamp beside him, are like a shark’s eyes; black and endless.

Soulless.

Bedelia makes every effort to control the quiver in her voice.

‘I have reached the *limit* of my efficacy,’ she explains. A tiny, bitter twist of her lips. ‘I don’t believe I can help you.’

I don’t believe anyone can.

Hannibal considers this in silence, his face betraying nothing. In all honesty, he feels very little. Will, really, is the only person who unlocks those frozen parts of him.

‘Are you giving me a referral?’ he asks, but Bedelia shakes her head.

‘No. I am simply ending our patient-psychiatrist relationship.’

Allowing the diary to fall shut with a snap, Hannibal moves around to the front of the desk, approaching Bedelia to test the limit of her nerve.

‘You tried to end it before,’ he reminds her. *You submitted then. Will you submit again, now?*

To his surprise, the smaller Alpha takes a step backwards, maintaining a safe space between them. Hannibal, from this distance, could not pounce with immediate success, and Bedelia is careful to keep her red-ringed eyes trained on him as she retreats. Slow and steady, so as not to trigger his chase instincts.

‘I… am *grateful* for your… *persistence* in engaging me after my attack,’ she says, the lie obvious in the waver of her voice. ‘However, in light of everything that has happened with Will Graham, I have begun to question your actions.’ She takes a breath, trying to steady her pounding heart. ‘Particularly your past actions with regards to *me,* and my attack.’

Clever girl…

Hannibal accepts this quietly. He has no particular ties to Bedelia; she was a good psychiatrist, and a resilient woman, but he shall do whatever he must to maintain his own security.

‘Did you share these questions with Jack Crawford?’ he asks, watching the spark of confirmation in Bedelia’s eyes.

‘No,’ she says, almost sighing at the truth sees in him. ‘And nor *will* I,’ she adds. ‘I would look just as guilty as you.’ Anger flares at the smug grin curving Hannibal’s lips, at the

impish sparkle in his eyes, and she swallows a growl. ‘But perhaps that is what you intended.’

Still, smiling, enjoying the game now, Hannibal begins to approach, backing Bedelia up, step by step, forwards the couch.

‘What *exactly* am I guilty of?’

‘Exactly, I cannot say,’ Bedelia replies, lifting her head to keep him in her direct line of sight. ‘I’ve had to draw a conclusion, based on what I glimpsed through the stitching of the *person suit* that you wear.’ Her breath falters, and sweat beads on her forehead. ‘And the conclusion that I’ve drawn is that you are… *dangerous*.’

So close now, sharing breath, Bedelia arching beneath him in an attempt to shield her throat… Hannibal allows her to bask in her fear, making no effort to soothe her.

‘I’m sorry you feel that way,’ he says softly. And Bedelia, her eyes wide, drops her voice to barely more than a whisper as she delivers her final request.

‘Please don’t come to my home again.’

Hannibal lowers his eyes to her jugular, watching the pounding beneath the skin, like a bird throwing itself against the bars of its cage. Bedelia slides out to the side, easing herself away from him, and has to take a calming breath before daring to begin the treacherous turn away in order to escape.

‘I will see myself out.’

Hannibal closes his eyes, memorizing the smell of her perfume, and her own scent beneath it. It will come in useful when finding her again. He listens to the clacking of her heels on his hardwood floor and then, before she reaches the door, he says,

‘I’m resuming Will Graham’s therapy.’

Bedelia sighs, and glances back over her shoulder.

‘To what end?’ She grimaces. ‘Besides your own?’

‘He asked for my help,’ Hannibal says. Simple and honest. ‘He still wants to be my mate.’

Anger flashes across Bedelia’s face; a tightening of her lips, a narrowing of the eyes, and Hannibal smells bitter smoke in her scent.

Then his former therapist sighs through her nose, shaking her head once in defeat. She is done.

‘Then maybe you deserve each other.’

We do, Hannibal thinks, dark eyes drifting to the dully gleaming scalpel on his desk as the door clicks shut behind Bedelia Du Maurier. *There is nobody else I would rather have by my*

side.

***

Shortly after his disappointing meeting with his former therapist, Hannibal receives a phone call from Jack Crawford.

They've found another body. Between seeing patients and acting as Will Graham for the FBI, this is turning out to be quite a busy day, leaving no time to brood over his biological longing for his Omega.

'His name is Roland Umber,' Price says, speaking as he collects swabs from the body. 'Same profile as the other victims. Alpha away, disappeared from home, and had a large dose of heroin in his system.'

'This victim wasn't *unstrung*,' Jack muses, nodding down to the missing chunks of skin. 'He was *ripped* from his moorings.'

'Whatever his imperfection, it was enough to aggravate the killer into tearing him down,' Hannibal says, causing Zeller to glance at him when he comes to stand between him and Beverly. He swallows, clearly surprised by how calmly objective the Alpha remains; Hannibal, in his sharp grey suit with his hands clasped before him, shows no trace of the discomfort seeing another dead Omega.

Beverly frowns, thinking aloud as she tries to slot the pieces together. She, like Hannibal, is better at controlling her emotions, although her eyes are a deep burgundy with the effort of it.

'He was discarded in a tributary over four hundred miles from anything that feeds into the dam where the first victims were found.'

'Like dandelion seeds,' Hannibal suggests. 'Casting bodies in every direction but his own.'

'Very poetic,' Price muses, sealing strips of resin-coated skin into a petri dish.

'The buffeting in the current causes so many post-mortem injuries, it's impossible to tell them from the ones they got when they were alive,' Zeller says. He leans forwards, trying to get to his equipment, but Hannibal is in the way. The Alpha moves, even as the Beta ducks his head in apology, but when Zeller needs to shift again, Hannibal is still blocking his path, and he then backs onto Beverly's toes.

'Excuse me,' the other Alpha murmurs, holding up a hand to guide Hannibal away.

Will's missing presence, with his Omegan ability to fit seamlessly into the group, is sharply apparent.

We all miss him, Hannibal thinks, allowing his pain to create a show of discomfort on his face.

Jack takes pity on him.

‘Doctor. Join me over here.’

Hovering on the sidelines, Hannibal inclines his head towards the body again.

‘There may be trace evidence preserved in the craquelure,’ he says. Price frowns up at him.

‘What?’

‘Craquelure,’ Hannibal repeats, getting the same puzzled expression. ‘It’s French,’ he explains. ‘For the cracks that appear on an oil painting as it dries and becomes rigid with age.’

Beverly looks around, one eyebrow quirking into a bemused look. A look that says *‘Will is mated to you? But you’re so different.’*

‘Cracks are not always weaknesses,’ Hannibal continues. He has Jack’s rapt attention at least. *Will would find this more interesting. How does he endure these people?* ‘A life lived accrues in the cracks.’

‘Could be *something* in there,’ Beverly says. A half-hearted agreement. The proverbial ‘thrown bone’ to soothe his Alpha ego. ‘Fiber, debris… Might help track where the bodies were before they got dumped.’

‘*What* do the victims have in common?’ Jack asks. ‘Is he just targeting Omegas, or is there something more?’

‘What if it isn’t what they have in common?’ Beverly replies. ‘What if it’s… what makes them different?’

She pauses, takes a breath, and turns to the driving license photos.

‘Each of these Omegas has a slightly different flesh tone,’ she continues. ‘… Could be like a color palette.’

Hannibal’s heart skips a beat and then begins to thud very hard in his chest. He hears Beverly’s voice, but they are *Will’s* words. By the way Jack lowers his eyes and grimaces, he recognizes it, as well.

‘The color of our skin is so often politicized,’ Hannibal says, coming closer to peer down at the pictures. So many beautiful Omegas… *So much potential*. He smells Will’s touch on them, and can almost imagine himself having this discussion with this mate. ‘It would almost be refreshing to see someone revel in the aesthetic for aesthetics’ sake. If it weren’t so horrific.’ His gaze lingers on an Omega with blue eyes almost as deep and clear as Will’s, and adds softly, ‘We’re supposed to see color, Jack. That may be all this killer has ever seen in his fellow man, which is why it is so easy for him to do what he does to his victims.’

‘Which is why there’ll be a lot more bodies on his color palette,’ Beverly adds, her eyes sparking as the idea catches, like a striking flint to become the burning fire of realization.

That is Will's fire, not yours, Hannibal thinks, tightening his throat around a snarl. Instead, he says, deceptively lightly,

'A fascinating insight, Ms. Katz.' He offers her a small smile as he leans in closer, though he makes no effort to lower his voice as he adds, 'Almost as if Will Graham himself were here in this room.'

'*Yes*,*'* Jack growls. 'It is…'

Hannibal turns away, hiding his smirk as Beverly follows Jack up to his office for a "discussion". Alone in the room with Price and Zeller, he leaves them to their testing stations and snaps on the powerful magnifying lamp with which to more closely study the body.

Leaning over the dead Omega, Hannibal closes his eyes, clears his mind and inhales. The first hint of rot. Water from the river… Salt… The sharp tang of resin and color preservative chemicals…

And then, very faintly, beneath it all, caught in the cracks, is another smell. A familiar smell…

Corn.

Once a scent is locked in, an Alpha such as Hannibal can track it for miles. Fortunately for him, he can search aerial surveys from the comfort of his office. All he needs to do is track the river back to the cornfield, and he shall find his killer.

Hannibal straightens with a smile. He could get used to being Will Graham.

***

After a dry bread roll, powdered eggs and three slices of apple for breakfast on Tuesday, Will strip-washes in his cell before Matthew escorts him to the visitor's room.

He has his first incarcerated 'therapy' session with Hannibal at ten.

Sitting in the dunking tank, Will remains aware of his surroundings so that he can track the changes in his body the moment his Alpha walks into the room. From the first swing of the doors announcing Hannibal's arrival, Will's heart trips at double speed, flushing his body with tingling heat. His crest swells and he can imagine the ridges flushing dark red on the back of his neck, radiating warmth in anticipation of a touch. Hannibal's scent is rich and heavy, complemented as always by his cedarwood and cloves cologne, and Will savors the delicate flavors as his blue eyes trail over the taller man's broad shoulders.

Hannibal pauses by the chair placed behind one of the lines on the tiled floor. He taps his foot down and quirks an eyebrow at Will.

'I've been advised to stay on this side of the line,' he says, shrugging out of his coat. Will hums and nods.

‘Select patients have taken to *urinating* on the therapists,’ he replies. His throat catches when he sees Hannibal’s dark suit, burgundy silk tie and blue shirt – the color makes him look all the more tanned; healthy and glowing.

My Alpha in his prime.

‘I would argue drawing a line might *encourage* a pissing contest,’ Hannibal says, draping his coat over the back of his chair.

Will grimaces. The distance between them feels brittle; although they were close only two days ago, his Omegan body is already returning to its Alpha-starved state. Bruised and stinging.

‘I’m not interested in a pissing contest with you, Dr Lecter,’ he says. ‘Please; pull up your chair.’

Hannibal’s chest loosens a fraction at Will’s words, and he carries the chair closer, until he is barely five feet from the cage. A respectful distance, and one that should not alarm Frederick or the orderlies undoubtedly watching through the security cameras, but still close enough for Will to smell him properly. And, if he needs to, he can get up and touch Will if his Omega needs it.

Smoothing out his trousers, Hannibal crosses one long leg over the other, keeping his eyes on his lap as he speaks.

‘You said “‘the light of a true mating bond won’t reach us for a million *years*, that’s how far away we are”.’ Glancing up, he sees Will try to suppress a flinch, and watches his Omega’s eyes flash gold. Hannibal tilts his head. ‘I hope our bond feels closer today.’

‘Mates have a symmetrical relationship,’ Will says, allowing a trickle of anger to warm his voice and make it wobble. It would be no good for him to be too calm. ‘Psychiatrist and patient, that’s *unbalanced*.’

‘There is a power differential between psychiatrist and patient,’ Hannibal agrees. ‘One that I’m well aware of, particularly with my own therapist.’

‘But we’re just having conversations,’ Will says, and Hannibal’s lips curve into a tiny smile.

You feel the imbalance, don’t you, Will? A one-sided bond leaves the Omega entirely at an Alpha’s mercy.

‘You threatened me with a reckoning,’ he murmurs, and Will nods.

‘I did.’ The Omega huffs. ‘I can’t claim *unconsciousness* on that one.’

Hannibal feels his eyes gleaming as he continues,

‘You were searching for something in your head to incriminate me.’ A calculated pause. ‘I can only assume you didn’t find it.’

What do you remember?

Will's brow furrows and pain flashes across his face. A cold shiver runs down his spine and he shifts in his seat, an ache behind his balls like he's been kicked.

'There's not much in there that I recognize,' he admits. *I don't recognize you, my Alpha… I have no idea who you really are*.

'Whatever you remember, if you *do* remember, will be a distortion of reality,' Hannibal says, his tone soft and soothing. 'Not the truth of events.'

Will nods, a part of his mind cataloguing Hannibal's nuances, his words and insinuations for what they are.

Oh, you are good, Dr Lecter… No wonder you had be so confused.

'I'm realizing that,' he mutters.

Nothing I remember about you is real. It was all a lie. Every moment.

Hannibal watches him, staring into his eyes, and Will stares right back. His mind is closed to him, the proverbial shutters down, thoughts shielded against invasion.

You no longer trust me. For all your talk, you are just as angry as before.

This Will is not the same Omega he bonded with. He is evolving.

Hannibal tries another tact.

'Beverly Katz has come to see you?'

Will tuts and rolls his eyes. He does *not* want to discuss this with the Alpha.

'Yes,' he says, bordering on defensive. Hannibal quirks an eyebrow.

'Wouldn't want Alana Bloom to worry about you dwelling on anything morbid, in what's to be a time of recovery,' he says, and is rewarded with a frown from Will. Finally, a reaction.

'It's the only thing that feels normal.'

'The violence?' Hannibal asks, but Will shakes his head, denying his darkness.

'The structure,' he replies. 'Of *understanding* the violence.'

Hannibal sighs, lowering his gaze for a moment.

'You're missing pieces of yourself,' he says. 'Careful what you replace them with.'

Will is quiet for a moment, not willing to argue with his Alpha but equally unwilling to back down. He waits, achingly vulnerable, and Hannibal relents. He sits forward, elbows on his

knees, clasping his hands together. Will *needs* this, and Hannibal will help him. He will always help him.

‘What did you see in the pictures?’

Will copies him, sitting forward as best he can in the narrow cage, dark eyes sparking black fire as the shadows grow and coil between them, like wisps of lover’s breath in the air. *This* is their power. *This* is their design, and, for a moment, it’s just like old times, back in Hannibal’s office.

‘This killer…’ Will’s voice is low, and humming with energy. ‘He’s not stringing his victims up; he’s stitching them together. Each body is a *brushstroke*.’ His eyes flicker gold, a flash of warmth in the cold. ‘He’s making an Omegan mural.’

Hannibal stares, rapt, as his mate’s mind opens up and *becomes* another. Becomes powerful.

‘Why does he do it?’ he asks, his voice hushed so as not to break the spell.

‘He’s missing pieces, too,’ Will replies, bitterness tainting his words. Hannibal glances away, pain flaring in his chest before he suppresses it. Will shouldn’t see his weakness. He needs to be strong for him.

‘Why Omegas?’

Will shrugs, slumping back against the cage. The darkness no longer dances between them, but the smoky musk of his scent lingers; proof of his excitement at the hunt.

‘Maybe he lost his own,’ he says, one hand straying unconsciously to the scar on the back of his neck, just below his crest. ‘Maybe he never had one, and he’s jealous, so he’s stealing others.’

Hannibal watches, his gut clenching, as his mate revisits the trauma of his past. After Will confessed to slicing into his own nape after being attacked by the Alpha, Samuel Coby, Hannibal had conducted his own research into the incident in New Orleans, piecing together the snippets from Will and the timeline he had provided. He discovered that Coby, 38, of Shreveport, Louisiana, had been convicted of stalking ten Omegas before kidnapping Denise Williams, bonded Omega of an influential Alpha on the town council, as retribution for granting planning permission to build over family land he had lost to gambling debts.

The police reports had been suspiciously vague in their recount of that night, but it seemed that Will had gone ahead to track Coby into a warehouse, been attacked and nearly forcibly bonded, and discovered to be an Omega posing as a Beta.

Article 62 had not yet come into effect, so he faced no repercussions for the lie, though he was reminded of an Omega’s place in society several times during the course of his court-appointed “therapy”.

No wonder he despises psychiatrists.

When Article 62 was passed, banning Omegas from any law enforcement role – among several other 'dangerous' professions – Alana helped Will to hide his biology at Quantico, though he never risked the screening process to be an Agent, and stayed in the relative safety of a teaching post.

'Will…'

Hannibal's soft voice draws him out of memories of concrete dust and oil, and Will flinches when he realizes he's rubbing his scar. Drops hand back to his thigh and twists his fingers together to keep them in their proper place.

'I'm fine,' Will mutters, scowling off to the side.

'Bad memories,' Hannibal murmurs, and the other man blinks, barely resisting the urge to roll his eyes. Instead, he hunches his shoulders and picks at the dry skin around his nails.

'It's more likely that he was bonded, and lost his Omega,' Will says, steering the conversation back to safer waters. 'He could be creating a mural to honor him…' *I honored every part of her*... He pauses, shaking his head to clear the lie. He didn't kill Abigail, and he didn't eat her. 'He's searching for something… Some way to make it all okay…'

Hannibal hums, tilting his head as he considers him.

'You're searching for a way to make your own situation okay,' he suggests. 'Do you feel an affinity with this killer?'

'I am drawn to them,' Will quips, glaring at Hannibal. To his surprise, his Alpha smiles, pleased by the outburst. He makes a mental note not to display so much emotion. Unless he's manipulating Hannibal, he has no intention of giving him what he wants. 'I understand parts of him. Parts of his design.'

'Like a jigsaw puzzle.'

'But with those missing pieces,' Will adds. He sighs, and shakes his head. 'Maybe you're right,' he mutters, rubbing his stiff neck again. 'Maybe I should just focus on my own recovery.'

That gets Hannibal's attention. The Alpha sits half an inch closer, suddenly alert, and Will smirks internally at the lure he's just tossed into the water.

'How did you feel, seeing the pictures?' Hannibal asks. 'Seeing a half a dozen dead Omegas?'

'Sick,' Will admits. 'Like I had been kicked in the stomach… It was a *visceral* response…' He glances up, his brow furrowing. 'How did *you* feel? Seeing them in person?'

'I felt cold,' Hannibal says, crossing his long legs again and brushing creases from his trousers. It's the closest to fidgeting Will has ever seen him. 'Disturbed… It made me think of you. How I failed you.'

Will stares at his mate, at the unexpected display of emotion on his Alpha's face. Is Hannibal being honest? Real? Or is this another game?

I wish I could trust you.

'How did you fail me?' he asks, speaking before he means to. His voice is muted, and choked, and he's sure Hannibal's eyes flash red for just a moment as the Alpha turns his face away.

Clenching his jaw, Hannibal gives himself a moment to regain his composure before replying.

'As your Alpha, as your friend, and my capacity as a therapist, I should have done more to protect you,' he says. *Found another way to nurture your darkness… Taken you away from this place… Helped you discover your power with me.* He wets his lips and offers Will a crooked smile. 'It's difficult for me to see you in here, like this.'

Will narrows his eyes, sensing more beneath the surface of Hannibal's words, held just out of reach by the Alpha. Hannibal *always* has to be in control…

'I'm sure Alana will appreciate your help with my defense,' he mutters. Exhales and rubs his tingling palms on his thighs. 'Who knows? Maybe you'll find a way to set me free.'

***

After lunch – a grainy bean slop, coleslaw, reformed turkey and a slice of bread – Will is informed that he has another visitor. This time, he refuses to be as gracious with Beverly Katz, and makes her come down to his cell to speak to him.

He sits on his cot, jaw set and eyes glinting in the darkness as he ignores the creeping urge to submit to the Alpha's musky scent. Beverly comes to a stop on the other side of the bars, her laminate visitor's badge attached to the hem of her jacket.

'Hi, Will,' she calls. No response. 'I was hoping to talk to you again. Are you feeling up to it?'

'Dr Lecter has advised me against dwelling on anything *morbid*,' Will replies, still refusing to look at her. Sees, from the corner of his eye, Beverly frown.

'I know you wanna stop these murders as much as I do.'

Will smirks, and rolls his eyes.

'Reasons for stopping multiple murders *do* readily occur to me, but…' He grimaces and sighs, shaking his head. He's trembling, more nervous than he thought he'd be, though tt adds a good wobble to his voice. After all, he intends to use every Omegan trick in the book. 'I'm gonna need something in return.'

Beverly, ever the protective Alpha, changes from frustrated to concerned.

‘There are things you don’t have?’ she asks. ‘I can talk to the Chief of Staff.’

‘Chilton?’ Will rubs his palms over his thighs again. Beverly’s scent is making his skin sting, as though he’s having a bad reaction to her proximity.

‘He’s being very co-operative,’ Beverly reasons, and Will can’t help but snort as he shoves up from the bed. He wants to build up some heat in his body to increase his scent, dulled as it is by the pheromone blockers.

‘Of *course* he is,’ he says. ‘I’m the first Omega this asylum has had in *centuries*. And he *loves* when I have visitors. He’s recording every word.’ He looks up at the ceiling, towards the steady red light in the corner where the microphone sits. ‘He’s, er… *gossipy* that way.’

That should piss him off.

Beverly rolls her eyes, barely suppressing a growl.

‘What do you *want*, Will?’

Holding very still in the center of his cell, Will stares down at stains on the concrete floor. From blood, or shit?

‘I’m wondering if you could can get me the thing that I really want,’ he murmurs.

‘Try me.’

Will braces himself, gathers his emotions and feels the pressure behind his eyes as the irises floor gold. He looks up, staring right into the Alpha’s face, a faint whine hanging in the air between them before he speaks.

‘I want you to ignore all the evidence against me.’

Beverly swallows, squashing every instinct in her body. Purses her lips and looks down.

‘You’re right. I can’t get that.’

Will lowers his head, nodding. Strike one… Beverly is too controlled to fall for such simple emotional manipulation…

‘How many *colors* will this killer add to his box of crayons?’ he asks softly, looking off into the distance and imagining rows upon rows of dead Omegas… Imagines the riots, the panic…

He smells a sharply bitter tang to Beverly’s heady musk, and he knows he’s got her. A moment later, she growls again and then sighs, shaking her head helplessly.

‘Say I ignore the evidence against you,’ she replies. ‘What then?’

‘Strike it from your mental record,’ Will says, approaching the bars. He ignores the way Beverly takes three steps backwards, maintaining a distance. ‘Start over,’ he continues. ‘If

I'm guilty, you'll find more evidence. If I'm *not* guilty, you'll maybe find that, too.'

A pause, barely a heartbeat, and then Beverly relents.

'Alright. I'll keep looking.'

'Good.' Brisk, now, Will lets himself shift his weight, pacing like a caged animal. After all, he is. 'Give me the file. I'll tell you what I think.'

He reaches for the envelope, his armpit pressed against the cold steel as Beverly hesitates another moment. Then the manila touches his fingertips, hits his palm and he pulls it into the cell with him. Realizes Beverly isn't leaving, and frowns up at her.

'Do you mind if I do this privately?'

'Yes.'

The Alpha pulls up a metal folding chair and sits down to wait. To *watch* him embrace his shadow and become the killer…

Will pauses, glances off to the side as his darkness rages at the intrusion. This is *intimate*... The only other person who's really seen him do this is Hannibal…

Turning his back on her offers a modicum of seclusion, and Will takes a slow breath, forcing his heart to slow down as he turns over the envelope.

Here we go…

Fear swamps him, and with it comes his shadow self. The dark current, warm and tempting, winds about his legs and rises ever higher, filling him with power. With *potential*.

Slim fingers pull out the photographs and Will flicks through them, building a mental image of the body. Pauses on the face… *Such a delicate face*... So Omeganly perfect… Soft lips, sharp jaw, doe eyes hidden behind closed lids…

Closing his eyes, he exhales long and slow. It's coming… Another exhale, nice and deep, and then he lets himself sink into the river.

He's in the morgue.

Will stares down at the body, Beverly sat behind him. She doesn't matter. Nothing matters but the creation before him. Laid out like an offering to the primal gods, a rubber sheet preserving his modesty…

'The skin isn't as discolored as the other victims'.' His voice is flat, but Will doesn't notice the way Beverly cringes at how *emotionless* he sounds. How cold. 'It looks fairly well preserved, all things considered…' He shakes his head, confused. 'Why would I throw *you* away?'

I wanted to keep you… My perfect body… Perfect Omega…

Will lifts the envelope, caressing the ripped seal. Rip… Ripped skin… Ripped stitches…

He's not stringing his victims up; he's stitching them together…

'Did Roland Umber have priors with substance abuse?' he asks, throwing the question back over his shoulder to Beverly.

'He was in an outpatient treatment program for drug addiction,' Beverly confirms.

'Heroin?'

'Among others,' the Alpha says drily, and Will hums. Turns back to the body.

I understand.

'He had a high tolerance for opiates,' he explains. 'The overdose didn't kill him. He *survived* what was done to him.' His heart begins to pound, flooding his veins with dark, raw power, making every inch of his body tingle. *Yes, yesssss…* 'He tore *himself* free,' he purrs, and he feels the pressure as his eyes flood gold again. 'He ran.'

Rising, Beverly approaches him, the fine hairs standing to attention on the back of her neck. She's never seen Will like this before; so focused, so coiled… He is a predator, and she's glad of the cage.

'How did he end up in the water?' she asks, speaking softly so as not to startle him.

'Killer didn't put him there,' Will replies, turning towards her. 'He'd have put him back in the mural if he caught him.'

Another glance at the photographs in his hands. Shrugs because he doesn't need them anymore.

'Other bodies were dumped. Roland Umber got away.'

'Got away from where?' Beverly asks, and Will sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration.

'This killer, he… er, he needs someplace *private* to do what he does.' He rubs his forehead, trying to grind out the headache building behind his eyes. 'A er, a warehouse, a farm, someplace abandoned upstream from the river where the body was found. It'll be close to the water.'

He hands the envelope back to Beverly, his skin crawling. It's as if death is *inside* him, and he can't stand it. He wants to scrub himself raw, to dig out the poison so that he's clean again.

'Thank you,' Beverly says, staring into his eyes to make him understand that she means it. Will ignores her, and moves three paces away before calling back to her before she can leave.

'I'm curious,' he says, stopping her in her tracks. 'What did *Hannibal Lecter* have to say about Mr Umber?'

Beverly pauses, frowning as she recalls the Alpha's comments.

'He thinks the killer tore him down,' she says. 'Dumped his body like the others.'

A purr inside him, deep inside his *bones*... Will narrows his eyes.

'That may be what he *said*,' he replies, shaking his head because *nobody* understands his Alpha like he does. 'It's not necessarily what he *thinks*.'

***

Blazing sunshine. Fresh corn and a gentle breeze. Hannibal smiles to himself as he comes to a stop at the edge of the field and stares at the three abandoned grain silos. Such a distinctive scent and flavor on Mr Umber's body… It had been laughably easy to track from the river, and now, after a good session with Will this morning, followed by a delicious home-cooked lunch, he has located the killer's secret place.

A plastic suit over his shoes and clothes keeps him from contaminating the scene. Hannibal slicks his hair back and covers his hands with vinyl gloves. He wanders between the silos, checking for the right one. When he sees a new padlock, shiny steel winking in the low sunlight, his heart thrills.

Here…

There is a ladder on the edge of the silo, the corroded parts replaced. The killer clearly climbs up to the roof to see his creation, just as Hannibal climbs now. Muscles bunch and he savors the stretch and pull as he moves.

If only Will could be here with me.

Onto the sloping roof, and Hannibal moves slowly now. Carefully balanced so as not to slip. Reaches the circular hole and peers over the edge. And then…

Oh.

His heart skips a beat. A tingle runs up his spine and he feels a tear well in his eyes. Inside the silo is a circle of bodies, each one carefully preserved… A blend of light and dark, each one positioned to form a masterpiece…

A brushstroke, as Will said, staring upwards, into the heaven itself, like angels awaiting rebirth. And, in the very center, the missing piece where Roland Umber should lie. The darker, coco-skinned Omega to finish them all…

Omegas, created in God's image and set on this earth for their Alpha counterpart. Each one perfectly balanced, perfectly colored and perfectly assembled.

The sound of metal clanging breaks his reverie, and Hannibal watches as the killer, a scruffy, sandy-haired Alpha, climbs inside with a hose to add another coating of resin to his artwork. A daily duty; caring for his creation.

‘Hello.’ Panic flashes across the other man’s face and the killer jerks, looking around and then up, to where Hannibal looks down from high above, seeing him utterly exposed. Hannibal smiles, and allows his eyes to flood red. ‘I *love* your work.’

***

By noon the next day, the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI has also located the Mural Killer’s cornfield, and the bodies of dead Omegas are being carried outside into waiting bags by local officers and FBI field agents.

Having been collected from his office by Beverly Katz, Hannibal now follows her from the car parked at the very edge of the field, glad he chose a light grey overcoat as the waning winter sun beats down on them.

‘How *ever* did you find this place?’ he asks, ducking beneath the yellow crime scene tape fluttering in the wind.

‘You and Will Graham are a good team,’ Beverly replies, grinning back at him as she leads the way towards the grain silos. ‘You gave us the “what” we were looking for, he gave us the “where”. Corn dust on the craquelure.’

Hannibal looks around, dark eyes scanning the activity around the metal containers. There is a conspicuous lack of Alphas.

‘Yes, Will and I do make a good team,’ he purrs, warmth pooling in his belly at the truth of it.

‘Will didn’t think Roland Umber was discarded,’ Beverly continues. ‘He escaped. We just went upstream from where the body was found until we hit corn.’

Just as I did, Hannibal thinks. *You just took longer to do so.*

He glances down at the Omegas spread on the ground, regretting the lack of artistry in their new display. A Beta officer drops his eyes as a sign of respect for his assumed suffering.

Jack greets them by the main silo. He looks sick.

‘Hey, Beverly.’ His voice is muted, though he makes an effort to collect himself when he sees Hannibal, and reaches out to shake with him, his hands covered in blue latex. ‘Dr Lecter.’

They grimace, each offering silent sympathy, and then Jack hands Hannibal a pair of gloves.

‘Follow me, please,’ he says. ‘You might wanna prepare yourself. You’ve never seen anything like this.’

‘I’m sure I haven’t,’ Hannibal replies, careful to keep his expression grim. *If only you knew.*

Stepping inside the silo, Hannibal holds his breath until his senses acclimate to the stench of warm, rotting flesh, resin and corn.

Jack pauses just ahead of him, allowing the remaining Beta field agents to continue working around him, photographing, dusting and cataloguing the Omegan bodies before cutting them free to carry them outside.

‘How could an Alpha go so bad?’ he asks, hands on his hands, shaking his head in exhausted confusion as he stares down at the all the corpses.

‘When it comes to nature versus nurture, I choose neither,’ Hannibal says, casting a dispassionate gaze over the shining flesh as he adjusts his gloves. His own instincts are muted, though he notes the tremble in his chest. *What if it had been Will in here?* ‘We are built from a DNA blueprint, and born into a world of scenario and circumstance we don’t control.’

‘Praise the mutilated world, huh?’ Jack looks away, whilst Hannibal raises his head.

‘What did it look like from above?’

Jack takes a tablet from under his arm, taps the screen and shows the photograph to Hannibal. A perfect circle of bodies, light to dark, creating an eye. And, in the very center, an Alpha, curled around, stark white and glowing in the midst of the Omegas.

‘Fascinating,’ Hannibal murmurs, staring down at his addition to the mural. Jack growls.

‘Ritual human sacrifice.’

‘I’m not sure if it’s an offering, but it’s *certainly* a gesture,’ Hannibal replies, gazing at the Alpha in the very center of the display. Sandy-haired and thin… Grieving no longer.

‘To whom?’ Jack asks, staring upward as well.

‘The eye looks beyond this world, into the next,’ Hannibal replies, dropping to a crouch to more closely inspect the Alpha below him. ‘And sees a reflection of man himself. Is the killer looking at God?’

‘Maybe it’s some sick existential crisis,’ Jack mutters. Hannibal rises, shaking his head.

‘If it *were* an existential crisis, I would argue there wouldn’t be any reflection in the eye at all.’

‘A person who could do this kind of thing, would they be likely to continue doing it?’ Jack asks, abandoning the tablet screen to watch Hannibal pace between the remaining bodies.

‘This could be his beginning,’ Hannibal says, shrugging in an imitation of helplessness. ‘And/or his end. He may never kill again. The proverbial Alpha and Omega.’

Jack huffs, his frustration and regret getting the better of him.

‘You said he doesn’t see people, that he sees material,’ he says.

Hannibal hums. Jack is asking about more than just this killer, and, when he replies, he laces his words with a poison, driving the barb in deep.

‘Those in the world around him are a means to an end,’ he says. ‘He uses them to do what he’s driven to do.’

The truth cuts keep, and Hannibal’s darkness croons at the pain he has inflicted.

That’s for Will.

***

Sitting in the therapist’s beige and cream office at Quantico the next day, Jack Crawford speaks more plainly and honestly than he has in years.

‘Will Graham was a means to an end,’ he admits. ‘I used him to do what *I* was driven to do, to save lives at the expense of his.’ He sighs. ‘I thought whatever I could put him through, he would fight his way back to himself and I was wrong.’

The therapist is a gentle, beige-wearing Beta called Michael Pierson, and he is very good at sitting back and listening to Alphas vent.

‘Maybe he’s still fighting?’ he suggests, speaking softly so as not to antagonize Jack.

‘Maybe he’s *not*,’ Jack replies, slumping in defeat. Michael shrugs.

‘Point is, you don’t know.’ When Jack looks away and he senses frustration, the Beta adds, ‘It’s *okay* not to know. You can’t know everything. You can’t be certain of it all.’

‘Knowing that Will descended into such savage behavior has changed the way that *I* see him,’ Jack says, his voice cracking with pain. ‘The way I see other people.’ Another pause, fighting a sigh, as though he is exhausted from the weight of it all on his shoulders. ‘The world feels much darker.’

Michael Pierson says nothing. He just waits, pale eyes fixed patiently on the Alpha’s face. His silence works; Jack has more to say.

‘It’s *not* just the guilt of what I did to Will Graham,’ Jack continues. ‘It’s the guilt of watching all these other lives fall apart based on what I *did*.’

‘What did you do?’ Michael asks, and Jack’s eyes flash red.

‘I pushed him! When I was warned to back off, I *kept* pushing him.’

‘You miscalculated,’ the Beta replies, but Jack shakes his head.

‘I *failed*. I failed.’ He stops, swallowing hard, and sits back as the silence rings between them.

After a moment, Michael sits forward in an attempt to catch the Alpha’s downcast eyes.

‘We all fail, Jack.’

Jack’s eyes burn with tears. He imagines Will, the *Omega* in his care, now sat unnaturally still on his small cot in the dank cell of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, and his throat aches with misery. Will is alone, now, and suffering, because of him.

‘I look at my friend and I see a killer,’ he whispers. ‘I’m failing to reconcile those two things.’

***

After the psych eval, Jack skips lunch and goes straight to the lab, where Beverly, Price and Zeller are swabbing and identifying the Mural Killer bodies.

’47 bodies,’ Beverly says, foregoing a greeting in favor of getting him up to speed. ‘We’ve identified 19 of them, but not this one.’ She gestures down to the Alpha on the table beneath her.

‘No record of fingerprints,’ Price says. ‘He was never arrested, or in any kind of a job that required security clearance or background check.’

‘Hopefully he’s been to a dentist,’ Zeller adds, and they all nod in agreement. Jack frowns.

‘Why am I looking at this man?’

‘Stitch patterns on John Doe 21 match Roland Umber,’ Beverly says, inclining her head to the dead Omega laid out beside the Alpha.

‘John Doe 21 is Roland Umber’s replacement in the mural,’ Jack says. ‘An Alpha for an Omega...’

‘What happened to his *leg*?’ Price asks, puzzled. Zeller shrugs.

‘Maybe the killer had to cut off his leg just so he’d fit.’

‘He changed colors *and* genders mid-brushstroke,’ Beverly says, shaking her head. It doesn’t sit right with her.

‘What did Dr Lecter say?’ Jack murmurs, crossing his arms and stroking his chin. ‘“The eye looks beyond this world, into the next, and sees a reflection of man himself”.’ He turns, staring at the enlarged photograph of the aerial view of the mural. ‘There was never supposed to be a reflection.’

At Beverly’s frown, he adds,

‘The killer’s having an existential crisis after all. The question is… *how* did he find his faith?’

***

Cooking to Beethoven adds a certain dramatic flair to any dish, and Hannibal wishes that Will could be here to share this experience with him.

Having taken the lesser Alpha's leg and chilled it overnight, the first thing he must do is remove the foot. Not much meat there, and a lot of gristle. It plops into the sink to be incinerated later.

Then, he divides the calf into four chunks, and trims them down to an equal size before carrying the shanks back to the kitchen. He flicks through his recipe cards and grins as he chooses one for 'Veal Osso Bucco'.

It is a calf, after all.

One the skin is removed and the muscle secured with string, Hannibal flours the shanks, seasons and then braises them. He makes extra, knowing that his mate will appreciate a home-cooked meal after days of prison swill, and he takes care to choose the best carrots and onions for the stock. Will needs to keep his strength up, and he did work so hard to help Ms. Katz find the killer, after all.

Into a casserole dish to cook in the oven, and Hannibal busies himself tidying before setting the table. He pauses when he goes to create a place for his Omega, his chest tightening. He remembers the feel of Will, almost in his arms but held back by metal bars, and his hand trembles as he sets his fork down.

No matter. He can still touch his mate, and Will shall join him soon enough. When he is ready, they can begin their life together in earnest.

Refusing to dwell on his melancholy any longer, Hannibal serves himself a plate, boxing up a second portion to take to the hospital tomorrow, and pours himself a glass of wine with dinner.

To Will and I, he thinks, smiling as he takes a sip. *And the good team we make.*

***

'How are we feeling today, Mr Graham?'

Will ignores Chilton's question, holding his hands out behind him so that Matthew can uncuff him now that he's secure in his visitor's cage. The slim Alpha presses a thumb to Will's pulse for just a second longer than necessary and then ducks away, leaving the room to wait outside until it's time to take Will back to his cell.

Frederick prowls around the dunking tank, the effect somewhat ruined by the fact that he has to lean so heavily on his cane.

'We'll need to do a full physical examination soon,' he says, practically *purring* at the idea. 'And, of course, it may be prudent to limit the number of visits from your Alpha… *Especially* ones leading to physical contact… Do you have much experience with conjugal visits, Mr Graham?'

What you wanna do, son, is pass the tag end of your line through the eye of the hook. Make sure you have about 5 or 6 inches of length on the tag end, that's it… Where y'at with it?

In his mind, Will hears his father's voice, a slow, steady Southern drawl, soothing him as he allows Frederick's words to wash over him.

'… can be *quite* traumatic, apparently.' Frederick stops when he hears the door open behind him, and turns to smile up at Hannibal and Beverly. The two Alphas smile back, with varying degrees of cool civility, and Hannibal's eyes pass over Frederick to land on his mate.

Will is sitting very still, his eyes glassy and expression vacant.

He is somewhere else, Hannibal thinks, feeling a surge of pride in his Omega's ability to leave his reality. *What does your mind palace look like, Will? How I would like to see inside those thoughts.*

'Thank you, Frederick,' he says, dark eyes snapping back to the smaller Alpha. He descends the stairs and reaches out to shake goodbye with the Chief of Staff. 'Shall I stop by your office when we are done? I have some paperwork for you to sign.'

'Of course.' Dr Chilton smiles coolly, and inclines his head to Beverly before limping away. Hannibal grins at his fellow Alpha when the door swings shut behind the other man, and then leads the way towards the cage.

'Will?'

Beverly watches as Hannibal approaches the door, allowing his scent to reach Will first. The Omega shifts, a low purr rumbling in his chest before he clears his throat, swallows, and visibly comes back to himself.

'Hannibal.'

'How do you feel?' Hannibal asks, sliding a hand between the bars to stroke Will's hair. Beverly lowers her gaze, shifting at the intimacy between the mates. She wouldn't want anyone watching her soothe Saul, so she half-turns away to give them some privacy.

'Tired,' Will admits, but tilting his head into the caress. It soothes some of the sting in his skin and loosens the muscles in his shoulders, even as his stomach rebels at the idea of having *anything* to do with Hannibal Lecter.

'Trouble sleeping?'

Will grimaces, blue-gold eyes flicking to Beverly.

'Bad dreams,' he mutters. He shifts, withdrawing from Hannibal's touch, and clears his throat again. A pointed sound. 'Why are you both here?'

'We'd like to ask you to look through the Mural Killer's photographs again,' Hannibal says, stepping back to join Beverly behind the line on the floor.

Will scoffs.

‘Oh, now you’re just taking *advantage*,’ he says, directing his words at Beverly. ‘You’re gonna burn me out before my trial, and *then* where will I be?’ He tilts his head. ‘What would Jack say?’

‘Jack’s excellent administrative instincts are not often tempered by mercy,’ Hannibal replies, and Will’s lips twist into a bitter smile.

‘Clearly.’

‘I’m devoting a *lot* of time to this mural, Will.’ Beverly’s voice is sharp, tinged with equal parts exhaustion and frustration, and she is less than subtle when she raises an eyebrow and adds, ‘It’s hard for me to focus on anything *else* I’ve been *tasked* to do. Could use your help.’

She doesn’t notice Hannibal glance at her, but Will does, and he has to work hard to suppress a growl. Instead, when she holds out a new photograph, Will diverts Hannibal’s attention by standing up and reaching for it with a sigh. He can’t refuse them, not really. He’s an Omega; it’s his instinct to submit.

Fucking Alphas.

Hannibal speaks the moment Will’s fingers touch the paper.

‘In the 19th century, it was wrongly believed that the last image seen by the eyes of a dying person would be fixed on the retinas.’ Will glances up at him, his shadow crooning as Hannibal’s words stroke it awake. Beverly watches Hannibal before looking at Will, admiration sparking in her dark eyes as she sees Hannibal feed the suggestions that help Will prepare to become the killer they are seeking.

A perfect match.

As his Omega drops his gaze to the image, to the circle of dead Omegas surrounding a pale Alpha, Hannibal lowers his voice to become ever more soothing.

‘What would be the last image fixed on this dying eye?’

His Alpha’s voice, so warm and sweet, flows into him like syrup, bathing him in light. Will closes his eyes, sinking into the dark current, the stream lapping at his knees, his thighs, and rising ever higher until…

A silo. Empty of grain for years, now a resting place for the materials he needs to create his masterpiece.

‘I made you pliable…’ Will isn’t sure if he’s speaking aloud. He doesn’t care if he is. He looks around at the resin-coated Omegas all around him. ‘Molded you. Set and sealed you where you lay…’ A purr tickles his throat, hovering in the air before his lips, and his eyes flood gold with pride. With *hunger*. ‘This is my design.’

So many bonds… so many lives, transformed…

‘A dead eye of vision…’ Will raises his face upwards, staring through the skylight to the heavens above. ‘… and *consciousness*. I am fixed and unseeing…’ He frowns, catching on a rock in the current, pausing and drifting.

Something’s wrong with this picture… Something out of place in this design…

The Alpha…

‘Unless someone else sees me,’ he murmurs, tilting his head as his shadow whispers in his ear. What is it trying to tell him? What does he know?

In the visitor’s room of the hospital, Hannibal gazes with open adoration and pride as Will’s scent thickens, becoming smoky and rich. He’s there; in the killer’s last moments, rebuilding Hannibal’s triumph.

That’s my boy.

In the darkness, Will begins to move. He is tracking now. Following the heady, musky trail in the memories.

‘One of these things is not like the others…’ He steps over a pair of dark-skinned Omegas, so similar they could be twins. Perhaps they are. ‘One of these things just *doesn’t* belong…’ He stops, staring down at the Alpha in the very center of the eye. Snarls, his lips drawn back from his teeth. ‘Who are you?’

Leaning, he stares at the pale flesh, the Alpha muscles and sandy hair… He could be sleeping… Recently preserved, recently added…

‘Why are you so different from everyone else?’ His heart begins to race, and tingles chase each other up and down his spine. ‘I didn’t put you here,’ Will whispers. His heart is thundering now. It almost sounds like hooves. ‘You… are *not* my design.’

The thudding is louder now. Hoofbeats on metal… *Footsteps* on the roof…

Will jerks around, staring upwards into the face of death. Into the black face and glassy white eyes of his demon. His wendigo. He stares, and the ebony monster stares back, his gaunt face *achingly* familiar.

And then… Will *is* the killer. He’s lying down, naked as the day he was born, a perfect finale to the display. It would make sense – he’s an Omega, after all, but Hannibal has changed the meaning of the eye… The Alpha and Omega, the entirety of the universe under one roof… The all-seeing eye.

I trust you, my Alpha.

His own consciousness bleeds into the killer’s, and Will can’t tell if the *killer* felt safe, or if they are his own mated instincts, because it is *Hannibal* stitching him to the Omega behind him. *Hannibal* speaking to him, so softly and reverently as he binds him to a corpse, wearing a plastic suit to protect his clothes.

‘Killing must feel good to God, too.’

You said those words to me before, Will thinks, staring up, his palm stuck fast to his cheek in the correct position.

‘He does it *all* the time,’ Hannibal purrs. ‘And are we not created in His image?’

With a jolt, Will comes back to himself. He’s in a cage, in the visitor’s room of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. He’s clothed; wearing a cheap scratching jumpsuit and sneakers… Hannibal and Beverly are watching him, separated from him by bars of metal.

He can still feel Hannibal’s vinyl-covered hands sliding the needle in and out of his skin.

Swallowing, Will ignores the bitter taste of bile in the back of his throat.

‘The killer is, er, *in* the mural,’ he says quietly. Beverly frowns.

‘What do you mean, *literally?’*

‘I mean, the man you’re looking for is *sewn* into his own mural,’ Will says, holding out the photo and tapping the Alpha at the center. ‘This man.’

‘What happened to his leg?’ Beverly asks, taking the photo back.

Will shrugs, shaking his head.

‘Whoever sewed him in took a piece of him… as a trophy.’ He’s careful not to look at his Alpha, who wears an expression of polite interest.

‘He must have had a friend,’ Hannibal says, his eyes gleaming as his remembers his own conversation with the Mural Killer, soothing him as he cooked the lethal dose of heroin for the Alpha beneath him.

You’re not alone, you know. In “The Resurrection”, Piero della Francesca placed himself in the fresco. Nothing flattering; he depicted himself as a simple guard asleep at his post.

In his mind, Hannibal sees himself crouching by the shivering man, sliding the needle deep into the crook of his elbow and injecting him with the opiate.

Your placement should be much more meaningful.

The Alpha had gripped him tight, desperation making his voice crack because it wasn’t finished.

I’m finishing it for you. We’ll finish it together. Hannibal’s heart skips a beat, an echo of the emotion he’d felt at the time. *When your great eye looked to the heavens, what did it see?*

Nothing.

The Alpha had been so hopeless, so lost to his grief… Hannibal had wanted to help him. To give him purpose once again.

If God is looking down at you, don't you want to be looking back at Him?

Beverly's derisive snort yanks him back to the present, though Hannibal is careful to hide his distaste at the sound.

'Some friend,' the forensic lead mutters. 'Kills you and stitches you into your own display…'

'One might argue that is the test of true friendship,' Hannibal says, allowing himself a glance at Will. 'To have someone see our true selves, and not be repulsed.'

I will never accept you, Will thinks, glaring at his Alpha. *I don't want to know you, or understand you.*

'Sounds more like love,' Beverly says, quirking an eyebrow at the heated look exchanged between the two men. She grins, tapping the photograph against her leg. 'I should get back to the lab with this. Thanks, Will. Take care of yourself.'

Will nods, not trusting his voice as he continues to lock eyes with Hannibal. His Alpha grins at him, his eyes flashing red as he saunters closer.

'Is that what we have?' Hannibal asks, hands still tucked beneath the coat draped over his arm. 'Friendship, or love?'

'We have a bond,' Will snaps, twisting his fingers together to keep from lashing out and grabbing for Hannibal. He wants to smash the smug bastard's face against the bars, mess up his hair and make him bleed. Make him lose control. 'What would *you* call it?'

Hannibal considers, catching Will's eyes and smiling when the ring of gold thickens around his irises. Will cannot help but react favorably towards him, no matter his rage.

He leans closer, sliding a hand free and offering it, palm up, for Will to take.

Will hesitates, resisting until the heat beneath his skin becomes a roaring inferno and he has to grab the other man for support, shuddering as he holds Hannibal's skin to his burning lips.

'There are many words to describe what we have,' Hannibal whispers, cupping the side of Will's face and stroking his Omega's jaw with his thumb. He feels dampness against his fingertips, and brushes Will's tears away. 'But most of all, *mylimasis,* we have potential.'

***

To his surprise, after Hannibal leaves, Will remains in the visitor's cage. Fifteen or so minutes pass in silence, though Will occupies himself with a quick fishing trip in Lake Eyrie, and then he becomes aware of the clack of high heels on the tiled floor.

For a moment, he thinks it might be Alana, come to give him an update on the dogs, but he smells Chanel No. 5 and, beneath it, the musky tang of an Alpha.

A tall woman, made taller by her pencil suit and stiletto heels, approaches him, her blue eyes sharp and mouth twisted in distaste.

‘Will Graham.’ Her voice, when she speaks, is brisk, and Will has to fight a submissive flinch and whine. He forces himself to look sideways – of course she doesn’t face him head-on, preferring him to twist to accommodate her – and watches as she places her briefcase by her feet. ‘Kade Prurnell,’ the Alpha says, looking down her nose at him. ‘Office of the Inspector General, FBI Oversight.’

Ah… The shark…

‘Am I still an FBI employee?’ Will asks, making no effort to suppress the prickle of gold in his eyes. ‘Or is that pending the outcome of my trial?’

Kade ignores the sarcasm – they both know that, thanks to current legislation, Will has no job to return to.

‘The point of the trial isn’t so much whether or not you did it,’ Kade says, staring coldly *through* him. ‘It’s whether or not you *knew* what you were doing *when* you did it.’

‘Right… Sounds like I’m unemployed,’ Will mutters, making a point of chewing his lip in a parody of concern. He can’t quite keep his breath from catching, though, and keeps his eyes lowered. The Alpha’s scent is overwhelmingly dominant.

‘*Dr Bloom* is hard at work on your unconsciousness defense,’ Kade continues, and Will nods.

‘Ah, yes, yes.’ His dark shadow roars to life in his chest, giving him the strength to glare right at her. ‘Poor little Omega. The FBI *made* me do it.’

‘The FBI made you a murderer, yes,’ Kade sneers. ‘That is Dr Bloom’s position.’ She scoffs. ‘As you imagine, she’s not popular.’

‘What’s *your* position?’ Will asks, staring up from under furrowed brows, his heart thundering behind his ribs. *I wish Hannibal was still here with me.*

Kade’s eyes glint like chips of ice.

‘Our position is that you are an unstable Omega, allowed to remain unmated for too long, and that you were already a murderer,’ she replies. Will swallows as Kade continues, ‘The prosecution will paint a picture of you as an intelligent psychopath, which is *flattering*, given what you are. You manipulated a respected Alpha into bonding you, and you conspired with your Omega Specialist to cultivate an illness that would ultimately be your alibi.’

Will nods slowly, realizing how *plausible* she makes it sound.

Fuck.

‘And then I killed my Omega Specialist to er, *broom* the footprints behind me?’ He shakes his head, disgusted.

‘That’s what everyone in the courtroom will hear when you take the stand,’ Kade promises. ‘*Regardless* of what you say.’

Panic licks at his insides, as much as he tries to ignore it.

‘Well, what’s to be done about *that?’* Will growls, and, to his surprise, Kade takes it as a real question.

‘Let’s discuss it,’ she says, walking even closer, her arms folded across her chest. ‘If you plead guilty, you’ll spare us all a trial, and I *personally* will see to it that you’re *comfortable* here.’

Comfortable? An animal in a cage for the rest of my life?

Will glares at her, not caring that his eyes are bright gold and his cheeks flushed pink.

‘I’m pleading innocent.’

Kade growls, long and low, sending shivers up Will’s spine to scratch at his crest. A warning for him to submit.

‘You very *publicly* lost your mind,’ she says. ‘Some would argue theatrically. The prosecution certainly will.’

‘All part of the performance,’ Will replies. ‘It’s just not *my* performance you’re watching.’

‘You’ll be found guilty,’ Kade continues, still soft but cold as ice. ‘And given the federal death penalty.’ She swallows, her eyes flashing red. ‘I’m trying to save your life.’

It’s the first honest thing Will thinks she’s said – she is, after all, still an Alpha, and all her instincts tell her to protect the Omega before her. But she’s wrong. She’s wrong, and Will *isn’t* going to rot in here for something he *didn’t do*.

‘I guess I’ll just have to save my own life,’ he snarls. He holds the gaze for a moment longer, making *sure* that Kade Prurnell knows he is not some meek little Omega to be bullied, and then turns away, dismissing her.

If he’s stuck in here, he might as well go fishing.

***

Birdsong fills the air. It’s still dawn – here in his mind, Will can control the time to make a moment last forever. The line whistles as he flicks it through the air, and Will releases it into the wind, sailing it far down the river as he can.

Deeply relaxed, he slips in and out of waking nightmares, shuddering as the rotting bodies of 46 dead Omegas float past him. They buff against his legs, blank, glassy eyes staring up, silently pleading.

Alpha… Help me…

A raven caws, reminding him of Cassie Boyle's body, displayed on the stolen stag's head. He flinches, wrenched from the dream by the buzz of the ward door. A squeal of hinges and then the clack of high heels again… His heart sinks, thinking it's Kade Prurnell come back to hound him.

The scent that reaches him, however, is gentle. Muted. Salty with fear… An Alpha, but a nervous one.

Who has come to see him?

He turns, and approaches the bars of his cell, frowning at the slender Alpha woman dressed in an expensive woolen dress, her golden hair perfectly coiled where it falls onto her shoulders. She is regal and elegant.

'I don't know you,' he says, and the Alpha nods.

'My name is Bedelia Du Maurier,' she replies, clutching the handles of her bag before her. Fear swells, and Will struggles to breathe past the tightening of his chest.

I know that name…

'You're Hannibal Lecter's therapist,' he whispers. Manages a nod, choking back tears. 'What's *that* like?'

Bedelia stares at him, her expression softening the longer she looks at the achingly pretty, *vulnerable* Omega before her.

'I've heard so much about you, I feel I almost know you,' she murmurs.

'You don't,' Will promises, and Bedelia nods. They both know Hannibal, after all.

'No, I don't.' She pauses, and then continues, 'But I *understand* you better than I thought.' *You are an equal match for Hannibal. You just don't realize it, yet.* 'I… wanted to meet you, before I withdraw.'

'What are you withdrawing from?' Will asks, stalking ever closer to the door.

'Social ties.'

Will snorts.

'Well, you're a *psychiatrist*; isn't our sense of self a *consequence* of social ties?'

'They certainly are in your case,' Bedelia murmurs, clever eyes peeling back the layers to see the broken shell beneath. At Will's look of hurt realization, she lowers her voice to be more soothing. 'It may be small comfort, but I am *convinced* Hannibal has done what he *honestly* believes is best for you.'

Will's eyes flash gold and, when he shakes his head, tears spill down his cheeks.

‘No, that wouldn’t be *small* comfort,’ he snarls. ‘That would be *no* comfort.’

‘The traumatized are unpredictable because we know we *can* survive,’ Bedelia says. ‘You *can* survive this happening to you.’

Something in her choice of words catches, and Will’s heart trips over itself.

‘Happening *to* me?’ he whispers.

Bedelia steps closer, breaching the security line painted on the concrete floor. From the other end of the corridor, a guard shouts at her.

‘Stay behind the white line, Ma’am!’

Ignoring him, Bedelia arches closer, wrapping both hands around the metal bars. Will hesitates, not wanting to incur a beating, or worse, if the guards think he’s threatening her. The door buzzes, and the guards begin to approach.

‘Ma’am!’

A large orderly, Matthew’s day shift replacement, strides closer, watching Will closely.

‘Step away from the bars… Ma’am…’

Bedelia purrs, drawing Will in to lean towards her. He’s taller than her, even though she is wearing heels, and her breath smells like mint as she tips her head to breathe into his lips,

‘I believe you.’

The orderly grabs Bedelia by the shoulder, backed up by both guards.

‘Alright, come on, let’s go.’

Marched away, Bedelia looks back one last time, and nods at Will. He stares after her, dizzy and panting from the revelation.

She believes him… She, Hannibal’s *therapist*, believes that Hannibal is making this happen to him… That he’s manipulating Will… That he’s been manipulating him all this time…

Shaking, Will scrubs his hands over his face, not sure if the wet on his cheeks is from sweat or tears.

What the hell have you done to me, Alpha?

Hassun

Chapter Summary

The trial begins, and, as Kade promised, the prosecution paints Will as an intelligent, creative psychopath, though Jack risks his job to testify that he might have pushed the Omega too far and was knowingly endangering him when he kept on the investigative team.

Will's lawyer receives a severed ear in the mail, cut from a corpse within the previous forty-eight hours, causing doubts to stir among those who believe in Will's guilt. However, when Hannibal shows the forensics report to Will, he realizes that there are too many differences for the killings to be done by the same person. When the prosecution agrees, and the trial continues, Will's judge is found brutally murdered and displayed in the courtroom, prompting a mistrial and saving Will from conviction – for now.

Chapter Notes

Hey peeps! Gosh, it's taken a while to write this chapter...

So, some of you may have noticed that I was fighting with Archive the other day. I am also writing a HannibalxWill season 4 story, and wanted to publish the first chapter (or at least part of the first chapter) the other day. BUT I was having MAJOR issues with getting it to upload, which resulted in 4 versions going up!

I deleted them all by mistake, but have now decided to take the time to write a proper first chapter for my new story, so watch this space if you're interested. I shall then explore an ABO version when I come to it with this storyline... Yay for more Hannigram!!!

The last Omega to be given the federal death penalty was Victor Feguer in 1963, although the more famous Lee Harvey Oswald would surely have suffered the same fate had he not been killed by a gunshot wound to the abdomen during his arrest.

How would they do it? Lethal injection, or the electric chair?

The stench of burned flesh assaults his nose, and Will fights bile. He stares at another version of himself, at the pathetic, weak Omega strapped to the wooden chair with a copper dome

over his skull, a leather mask hiding his face so the witnesses don't have to see his final moments of pain.

A crest brace paralyzes him, and the clock ticks backwards. Time reverses, and the pieces come together for one final, glorious moment.

This is my design.

And then he moves. Will grabs the handle and pushes it up, sending 2,000 volts of electricity shooting through the wires and into his other self. The Will strapped to the oak chair convulses, knuckles white as he grips tight and judders with the force of the energy crackling through him. Seizes, gasping for breath, blood vessels rupturing and singing where the red touches the electrodes, and then –

'Mr Graham. It's time.'

The buzzing isn't electricity, but the door at the end of the ward. A sour-faced Alpha Orderly has woken him, and Will realizes he is lying flat on his back on the thin, lumpy mattress of his cot, t-shirt damp with sweat and blanket tangled around his legs.

When he sits up, swinging bare legs out into the chilly air, he sees his suit in the Orderly's hand, safe inside a plastic cover.

At least it's not the one Hannibal bought for me, Will thinks, nodding grimly to show he's understood the instruction.

When Dr Chilton had informed him of his trial date, three days after his incarceration, he had presented Will with a navy-blue suit imported from Italy. It was new, never worn, and certainly nothing Will could have afforded, or would have spent the money on, himself. He had recognized it immediately as one of Hannibal's purchases, and refused the clothing, requesting one of his own. An old, plain suit from his closet; a sturdy wool blend that had seen him through three funerals, a wedding and twelve court hearings.

Today will be the thirteenth.

Breakfast consists of a strawberry yoghurt and two swigs of bitter black coffee, and then Will washes as best he can using cold water from the sink. Drags his fingers through his curls – he needs a haircut – and rolls on the Omega-sensitive deodorant Matthew left for him. The wiry Alpha is off sick today, but he'd made sure to leave fresh toothpaste and the anti-perspirant for Will before the end of his last shift.

He doesn't know how long he has before they come to collect him, so he wastes no time in pulling on fresh boxers and then his soft suit trousers. They smell like *home*, like his scent, his dogs and his detergent, and, for one panicky moment, Will's lower lip trembles and a scream chokes his throat.

Don't think about it. Don't think about the trial. About what could go wrong… About what will happen if they find me guilty… When they find me guilty…

His fingers tremble as he buttons his shirt. Will swallows the bitter taste in his mouth and concentrates on working up from the bottom to the collar. As he dresses, he has the strangest sense that Hannibal is doing the same thing, in his house across the city.

When he'd been pseudo-bonded to Garrett Jacob Hobbs, Will had confessed to feeling connected to him, showering and eating and sleeping at the same time as the Alpha… Is that what this is?

Will frowns, trying to remember how to knot a tie. *Over, under, over, through…*

Hannibal wears his ties in a more formal Windsor knot… What color is he wearing? Dark, surely, to mark the solemnity of the occasion.

Growling to himself, Will jerks the tie up to his throat, almost strangling himself with it, and then smooths it down. He doesn't want to be thinking about Hannibal right now. Not today, of all days.

He tucks the shirt in, sharp eyes spotting a crease that he wishes he could iron out. No doubt Hannibal's shirt, thick and silky against his sensitive Alpha skin, is lying perfectly smooth, held in place beneath a silk four-button waistcoat…

Will shrugs into his suit jacket and then scrubs his face, grinding the heels of his palms into his eyes in a futile attempt to rid himself of his tension headache. Nerves squirm in his belly and the nausea he'd thought had gone rushes back with a vengeance, making his mouth water in anticipation of retching.

I bet he's wearing the pearl cufflinks he wore to the opera.

The thought is sudden, and gone in a flash, but Will *knows* that he's right, and that Hannibal is wearing a subtle reminder of their first date. As far removed from that night as this trial hearing is, the knowledge that his Alpha is going to be there is disturbingly comforting, and Will hates himself. Loathes instincts.

Nothing but a needy little Omega.

The big Orderly returns, wearing gloves to protect Will's skin from his touch, his expression etched from stone and eyes hard as he snaps the cuffs onto Will's wrists.

'Let's go.'

The grip on Will's shoulder promises him no escape, even if he *had* wanted to run, and Will settles for controlling his breathing, recalling the different types of trout lures his father showed him when he was a child.

If you never use any other fly, son, remember this one. The Parachute Adams…

His feet carry him through the halls of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, past cells of hissing, cooing Alphas, and out into the early morning air, to the back parking lot where the prison transport van is waiting.

Now, my personal favorite for these waters is the Elk Hair Caddis, but your granddaddy used to swear by his Crayfish fly. Them trout just gobble 'em up.

Will spends the ride to the courthouse mentally constructing lures for today's fishing trip – he's not going to want to be present for the prosecution's scathing description of him as an intelligent and creative psychopath. Will would much rather be in a river, with the sun on his face and birdsong in his ears, safe and alone away from it all.

Hannibal is waiting for him at the plaintiff's entrance to the courtroom. As Will's Alpha, he is permitted to enter the back rooms with the holding cells, to soothe his Omega before Will presents himself to the judge. His eyes gleam when he sees Will escorted inside, shuffling along with ankles shackled and wrists chained to the belt around his waist.

Will spares him a single frown and then concentrates on the floor, careful not to trip as the Orderly and a bailiff lock him in his cell and unlock the cuffs. They will not be left unattended, and Hannibal moves slowly so as not to cause concern. He comes to stand by the bars, and drapes both arms between the metal, inviting the Omega closer.

'Hello, Will.'

Will glances up at him, gold-tinged eyes raking over Hannibal's outfit. Deep burgundy and a dark tie, Hannibal is all sharp lines and impeccable tailoring, and Will can feel himself shrinking, feeling grubby and cheap next to his Alpha.

Fuck. I should have accepted the suit he gave me.

'Come here,' Hannibal murmurs, beckoning him into his embrace. Will hesitates for another a moment and then the bubble in his chest bursts, sending sharp pain radiating out into his spine and up to his crest. Trembling, he folds himself into Hannibal's arms, resting his head on the bars separating him from Hannibal's chest.

He hates this. Hates that he needs him so much… But he can't do this on his own. Not yet.

'How do you feel?' Hannibal asks, cupping the back of Will's head and stroking his hair. Will closes his eyes and ignores him, focusing instead on the feel of strong fingers winding through his curls, nails scraping his scalp and the smell of Hannibal, thick musk, cedarwood and cloves, and that rich, coppery tang that is uniquely *him* filling his nose. He lets out a long, low whine, and feels Hannibal's chest rumble with a purr designed to soothe him.

'Court in ten minutes, Dr Lecter,' the bailiff calls. The interruption is like ice on the back of his neck, and Will jerks away, straightening out his jacket and tie. Hannibal smiles, unperturbed, and withdraws a pair of familiar spectacles from his breast pocket. He turns to the bailiff and holds them out to be inspected. The bailiff takes them, turning them over and checking for any hidden weapons or lockpicks, and then nods.

Hannibal holds the glasses out to Will, who takes them with a shaking hand and slips them on as an extra layer of defense against the room full of Alphas he's about to enter.

‘Your case has inspired several protests,’ Hannibal says, lowering his hand through the bar again and taking Will’s hand in his own. They stand, a small distance between them, the Alpha shielding his Omega from the world as best he can, thumb stroking back and forth over Will’s dry knuckles.

Will scowls.

‘What are they protesting?’

‘The Southern Baptist Church is leading a petition to have you freed and me arrested in your place on the grounds that you, as an Omega, have no autonomy or consciousness of decision, and thus cannot be held accountable for what is, ultimately, my failing,’ Hannibal replies, grinning when Will gapes at him, cheeks red and eyes blazing gold. He dips his head closer. ‘I thought you might have mixed feelings about that one.’

Will’s blush darkens, and he snaps his mouth shut, studiously avoiding his Alpha’s red-ringed eyes.

‘And the others?’ he mumbles, using his other hand to cover Hannibal’s, enfolding him in his hot grip. He’s not sure how he feels about Hannibal being arrested. Does he want it? Or does he just want to beat Hannibal senseless and then go home with him?

Hannibal squeezes tightly, grounding him.

‘The Omega Rights and Liberation Organization is divided into factions over whether or not you should be tried in the same way as a Beta or an Alpha – some agree, but believe that the system is biased against you, and others say that, until the judicial system is inherently equal, you should receive special dispensation.’

Will snorts.

‘They’ll be disappointed,’ he mutters. Releasing Hannibal’s hand, he scrubs his face again, feeling the rasp of too-long stubble. ‘You should go.’

‘I’ll visit as soon as I can,’ Hannibal promises, and Will, too preoccupied to argue, nods. If he concentrates, he thinks he can hear chanting outside, which would explain the tension rolling from the Orderly and bailiffs around him. He can feel their stress like needles pricking his skin, making him want to recoil and hunker down in the corner of the room.

There’ll be media coverage of the case… No wonder they hurried him in through the back door. No doubt Freddy Lounds was lurking and got a good shot of him, head down, in chains, though she’d have to elaborate on the already scant details to produce another article so soon after her account of his arrest. One of the Beta Orderlies had left him a print-out of TattleCrime.com article last time he’d been on shift, allowing Will to read ‘all about’ his case.

All too soon, it’s time to enter the courtroom. Two bailiffs escort him in, free of shackles for once, and Will feels the pressure of a dozen red Alpha eyes on him.

Fuck. This is harder than he'd thought.

There isn't a single Beta in the room, and certainly no other Omegas.

He's alone.

Carpet cleaner, cheap lemon cleaning spray and the first hint of body odor assaults him. Will struggles to breath, his chest tight and heart pounding as he shakes with his defense attorney, an enigmatic Alpha with a reputation for getting even the worst criminals to walk free. Alana kept her promise.

As he sits in the chair behind the polished table strewn with legal papers and glasses of water, Will closes his eyes, cataloguing and discarding each scent until he smells Hannibal.

There.

His Alpha is tense; angry? Will isn't sure how much time passed between Hannibal's visit and entering the courtroom – another twenty, maybe thirty minutes after the bailiff had given a ten minute warning – and Will wonders what might have happened in the meantime.

He can smell coffee, and soap… When he glances round, Hannibal smiles at him, and Will realizes he's changed his tie. A spill? That would explain the frustration, though he prefers this one – white silk with red blossoms, like blooms of blood in the snow…

What happens to an Alpha after their Omega dies?

'All rise for the Honorable Judge Davis.'

At the call, Will snaps his head back around to the front, and gets to his feet as the judge lumbers up to his podium.

'Be seated,' the greying Alpha says, cold blue eyes skating over Will and his defense team, lingering on the prosecution and then dropping to the file before him.

Everyone sits, and, as the case is introduced to the record, Will wonders if electrocution would be better than lethal injection.

'Prosecution, you're first,' Judge Davis says.

The prosecutor, Lilian Vega, is an attractive woman in her mid-forties. She wears Chanel suits, Gucci shoes and Prada jewelry, and she knows how to work a courtroom. She rises from her chair to pace the floor between Will and the judge.

'Thank you, your Honor,' she says. Her voice is deceptively smooth, like the caramel highlights in her hair, but there is a cold gleam to her eyes that chills Will's blood.

Tie the string ten times around the lure, knot and clip it free…

He can feel himself retreating, sinking into the dark current as the prosecutor begins to speak, and he is only vaguely aware of what she is saying.

‘Let me tell you a story,’ Lilian says. ‘Of a mild-mannered FBI instructor, who was asked to create a psychological profile of a murder.’

At the defense table, Will’s lawyer, Steven Brauer, leans forward, his attention rapt as he waits to pick apart everything his opponent says.

‘Garrett Jacob Hobbs. The Minnesota Shrike.’ Lilian’s mouth twists in distaste. ‘*He* killed young women that looked just like his daughter.’ She paces again, and turns her eyes up to the judge. ‘He killed them, and he *ate* them.’

Repulsion shivers through the crowd, and Hannibal’s darkness purrs at the bleating of the frightened sheep.

‘Will Graham understood the way Hobbs thought; that’s how he caught him,’ Lilian continues. ‘He shot Hobbs dead while he cut his daughter’s throat. So, Will Graham was able to save Abigail Hobbs’s life.’ She smirks. ‘*But*, in creating a profile of her father, he *Imprinted* on Garrett Jacob Hobbs, creating a pseudo-bond so *strong* that he couldn’t escape it.’

Lilian turns squarely to the audience.

‘You see, Will Graham is *not* the Beta that he pretended to be in order to gain employment at the FBI. Article 62 prevents Omegas from knowingly endangering themselves *and* others, by restricting their access to such violent environments, but *Will Graham* thought he was above the law, and *lied* his way into the academy. Where, after Imprinting on this psychopathic Alpha, in a prodromal state, he killed four more women.’

Switching on projector, Lilian gestures to the screen.

‘Cassie Boyle.’ An image of Cassie, impaled on the stolen stag’s head, draped over the antlers in an expression of hedonistic abandonment… Hannibal’s heart thrills to see his work again. ‘Marissa Schuur,’ Lilian continues, clicking to the next image. The rude girl, impaled in Garrett’s hunting cabin. ‘Georgia Madchen.’ The unfortunate Omega, burned to a crisp for knowing too much. ‘Abigail Hobbs.’

Will glances up, blinking away the stinging in his eyes when he sees the cropped photo of Abigail hunting with her father. She is tanned and smiling, her face young and carefree, hair fiery in the sunlight… A picture of innocence.

I’m so sorry, Will thinks, swallowing back the lump pressing against his windpipe. *I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you.*

‘He was able to save Abigail Hobbs from her father, but he wasn’t able to save her from himself,’ Lilian says. Her voice rasps with a growl. ‘He killed her, and he *ate* her.’ A pause, where she shoots him a look of disgust before clicking to the last slide. ‘At the very least, he ate her *ear*.’

Abigail’s ear, the same one he’d vomited into his kitchen sink, the same ear Will *remembers* Hannibal forcing down his throat with a tube as he shivered and squirmed in the throes of

Heat… It glares down at the courtroom, a visceral reminder of the grotesque reality of this case.

‘What happened to the rest of Abigail Hobbs is locked away inside the recesses of Will’s Graham’s traumatized mind, or so he would have you believe.’ Lilian’s voice sharpens, and she stalks closer to the Omega, her thick scent reaching him first and forcing him to dip his head in submission as she looms over him. ‘Something else you should know about *Will Graham*,’ the Alpha continues. ‘He has *remarkable* visual memory, *even* for an Omega. And, *as* an Omega, he’s keenly insightful into the human condition, and, I would argue, he is the smartest person in this room.’

I couldn’t agree more, Hannibal thinks, his eyes gleaming maroon with pride and a low purr rumbling in his chest. *You are my perfect equal, Will.*

‘He’s capable of creating a psychological profile of a *completely* different kind of murderer,’ Lilian finishes, glaring at Will. She sighs, and turns to the judge. ‘One that would become his alibi.’

Judge Davis nods, and Lilian returns to her chair. The ageing Alpha looks at Will’s lawyer.

‘You’re up, Mr Brauer.’

Steven smiles at Will, and rises with a throat-clear and a show of unbuttoning his suit jacket. He means business.

‘Will Graham is an Omega,’ he says, his voice ringing out across the room, sparkling blue eyes lingering on each Alpha to drive the point home. ‘As an *Omega*, he is limited by certain biological impairments.’

I’m not sure which is worse, Will thinks, desperately listening out for the early morning birdsong of his fishing scene, instead of Steven’s well-meaning barbs. *The prosecution’s contempt or the defense’s patronization…*

‘He came *highly* recommended from the New Orleans homicide department,’ Brauer continues. ‘Where he worked, *legally* as an Omega, until the implementation of Article 62. Now, everybody here in this courtroom knows how susceptible Omegas are to external influences, which is why, when he was *advised* to transfer to the FBI, Mr Graham felt pressured to hide his identity and continue working within law enforcement.’

Steven walks slowly, one hand in his pocket, languidly gesturing with the other.

‘He was working as an instructor for the FBI, a *teaching* position, which I’m sure we all agree is a suitable role for an Omega, when he was approached by Jack Crawford, a very *influential* and *dominant* Alpha, and asked to help create a psychological profile of *another* Alpha; Garrett Jacob Hobbs.’

Steven pauses, smiling kindly down at Will, the way one might smile at a baby.

‘Mr Graham agreed to help, without knowing that he would have to get *so* close to Hobbs that he, as an *unbonded* male Omega, would risk Imprinting, and forming a pseudo-bond to a psychopathic killer. Then, when he finally met and bonded an Alpha of his own, the triggering of his Heat after so long *responsibly* managing his heat cycles – so as not to disrupt his colleagues – led to a rare form of Prodromal Phasing.’ Steven, winding his way to his climax, alternates between the judge and the room at large. ‘This effectively caused him to behave in an *unconscious* state, following the residual urges of his first Alpha, Garrett Jacob Hobbs, that led to the tragic deaths of four more women, including Abigail, the daughter Hobbs had been trying to kill when Will stopped him.’

Steven sighs, and turns fully to Judge Davis.

‘Your Honor. These are *not* the actions of a creative, intelligent psychopath. At least not one that’s still alive. Will Graham was acting on instinct, having suffered *irreparable* neurological damage caused by the swelling in his brain, with *no* autonomy over his actions. To punish him for these crimes would be grossly unjust. The real killer is dead. Will Graham is as much a victim of Garrett Jacob Hobbs as any one of the girls he killed. He needs help, yes, but not punishment.’

Tracking the buoyant Alpha back to his seat at the end of the defense table, Hannibal considers the privileged assumptions that have contributed to Steven Brauer’s explanation of Will Graham. It gives the Omega no credibility, no independence, and no resilience. Will, in Brauer’s mind, is nothing more than a weak bundle of submissive instincts.

How I would like to show you the dark power hiding inside my mate, he thinks, lacing his fingers together on his knee so as not to ball his hands into fists. *Together, we could make the world scream.*

But, for now, Will is a lost little lamb, entirely at the mercy of the Alphas around him.

Entirely at my mercy, perhaps, Hannibal agrees, smirking to himself. *But I look forward to the day when he takes some of that power back.*

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After opening statements, the court adjourns for a short recess, allowing the judge to relieve his bladder before summoning them back in. Pacing the corridor outside, waiting to be called to the stand, Jack Crawford checks his watch every fifteen seconds and sighs in a vain attempt to loosen the tension shrinking his shoulder muscles.

The sound of heels on marble floor catches his attention, and he looks round to see Kade Prurnell striding towards the courtroom, having just arrived to oversee his testimony. The blonde Alpha pauses when she sees Jack, narrowing her eyes at his fretting.

‘Moment of truth,’ she says, hinting at a warning. Jack comes to stand before her, hands by his sides.

‘If I only knew what the truth was.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with your instincts,’ Kade says, but Jack shakes his head.

‘My *instincts* have not yet arrived at conviction,’ he replies, and Kade frowns.

‘*Mine* have,’ she snaps. ‘With the benefit of no previous involvement, and no personal connections to the accused.’

‘Meaning I can’t be impartial?’ Jack growls. Kade shrugs.

‘Of course you *can* be impartial, but right now you’re *not*.’ She leans closer. ‘You *have* to believe something, as long as there is evidence and reason to believe.’ Jack looks away, but Kade persists. ‘You’ve got reason. You’ve got evidence.’ Jack glances at her, his mouth a tight line. ‘Will Graham is playing a game,’ Kade says, lowering her voice to draw him in. ‘I *understand* why that might be hard for you to accept.’

‘*Do* you?’ Jack raises an eyebrow in disbelief. Kade smirks.

‘It’s easier to an *Alpha* who missed an Omega’s suffering, than it is to be the *Head* of Behavioral Sciences at the FBI, who missed a *killer* standing right in front of him.’

You don’t get it, do you?

Jack eyes her in silent contempt, and Kade continues,

‘There’s a *reason* that you’re a witness for the prosecution, *Agent* Crawford.’

‘Remind me what that reason is,’ Jack says, and Kade sighs.

‘If you *can’t* represent your *own* beliefs, represent the Bureau’s.’

A clerk calls Jack before he can reply, and Kade gives him a final warning as she follows him into the courtroom.

‘Let yourself off the hook, Jack.’

Taking the stand, Jack swears his honesty oath on the Bible and then the questions begin. Lilian Vega stands, a file in her hand as reference and prop.

‘How did you meet Will Graham?’

Without looking at the vacant expression on Will’s face, Jack replies,

‘I met him at the opening of the Evil Minds Research Museum. He didn’t agree with what we called it.’

Will remembers that day, four years ago. After his publication of the standard monologue on *Time of Death by Insect Activity*, he’d been asked to review some live case files in order to expedite the capture of the suspected killers. In three out of four cases, he provided them with the evidence and profile needed to catch the killer. In the last case, he identified the victim as one of the Chesapeake Ripper’s, and the case was escalated to Agent Jack Crawford. Will had

compiled a short psychological profile of the Ripper, based on the victim's mutilations, but it had disappeared into the files of the Behavioral Science Unit, never to be seen again.

Shortly after that, he had been personally invited by Jack Crawford to attend the opening of the BSU's Evil Minds Research Museum. Alana had dragged him along, insisting that socialization was 'good for him' and he had met the Alpha himself. Jack had been intimidating and overwhelming, and had seemed wholly too interested in Will to be safe.

I should have listened to my instincts and got out when I had the chance.

'He told me that the title "mythologized banal and cruel men, who didn't deserve to be thought of as supervillains",' Jack continues, casting his mind back to the gathering, where he had bumped into the brilliant, shy man skulking in the corner with his eyes downcast and hands shoved into his trouser pockets, oblivious to the admiring stares sent his way.

Lilian clasps her hands before her.

'And what was your first impression?' she asks. Jack can see Kade, craning her long neck to watch him closely. She is clearly concerned that he will venture 'off-script'.

'He was intelligent,' Jack replies. Flicks burgundy eyes to Will for a moment and then looks away. 'And arrogant. And… *unusually Omegan* for a Beta.'

'Which is why he wasn't real FBI,' Lilian says. 'He didn't pass the screening procedures.'

'Yes.'

'But you felt that he was qualified to work in the field?' Lilian asks, and Jack glances at Judge Davis, who raises an eyebrow at him over his half-moon spectacles.

'Under my supervision,' Jack says. Lilian nods, as though considering this.

'You believed that he was valuable because he could think like a killer.'

'He could think like *anybody*,' Jack corrects, and Lilian smirks.

'Sounds like a supervillain.' She gives it a moment to sink in, in which time Kade Prurnell gives Jack another warning look. Lilian then heads to the evidence table in the middle of the room. 'Five horrendous murders, over *forty* different pieces of forensic and physical evidence that tell us that Will Graham can *think* like a killer because he *is* one!'

Hannibal's dark, calculating eyes track the prosecutor around the room, his mind carefully storing each word that she says about his mate. She doesn't know it, but the ice on which she stands is very thin indeed, becoming even more precarious when she moves to stand over Will again and speak her words down to him with a twisted, malicious expression on her face.

'Rather than feel *tormented* by the work he did, Will Graham *enjoyed* the cover his role at the FBI gave him to commit his terrible crimes.'

Jack shakes his head, speaking before he can think about what he's saying.

'I don't believe that to be true.'

The prosecutor stops, surprised at the sudden turn of events. Up until now, Jack's answers have worked with her case, but this is a shocking rebuttal.

'Agent Crawford?'

Staring at the miserable-looking Omega, Jack feels his gut twist and he knows what he has to do. No matter the cost.

'Will hated every *second* of the work. He *hated* it. He didn't fake that. He hated it, and I kept making him do it.'

Scrambling to regain control of her witness, Lilian approaches Jack.

'Why then is it that when you offered him an opportunity to quit, he refused?' she snarls, her eyes flickering red in frustration.

'Because he was saving lives!' Jack snaps, his own irises blazing crimson. Kade Prurnell closes her eyes and shakes her head, disappointment and contempt warring for dominance on her face. Surprise flickers over Hannibal's face before he re-schools it to neutrality, and he glances at Will, who has lifted his head to look at his former friend and mentor. Even from here, Hannibal can see his Omega's eyes shining gold, his lips pursed into a thin line and his throat bobbing around what is presumably a stifled whine.

The fire dims inside Jack and he sighs again.

'I had been warned by more than one person, that if I pushed Will, I'd break him,' he says quietly. He works his jaw, clearly angry at himself, and tips his head towards the judge. 'I put those checks and balances in place, then ignored them.' Another look at Will, regret etched into every line around his eyes. 'And here we are.'

At the defense table, Steven Brauer grins, his eyes glittering at the testimony. He glances around as Kade Prurnell jerks to her feet and storms to the door. She turns, shooting Jack a filthy look, before leaving to report back the betrayal.

Hannibal smiles, curious to know how Jack will fare under the defense's line of questioning. This is turning out to be far more interesting than he'd anticipated.

***

Packing up before lunch, Steven turns to Will and addresses him for the first time since entering the courtroom.

'What does Jack Crawford drink?' he asks, sliding his papers back into his briefcase. 'Whatever it is, I need to send him a *very* expensive bottle.'

Will snorts.

‘He said I’m a killer because he drove me *insane*,’ he snaps, glaring somewhere towards Brauer’s abdomen. He hasn’t been able to look his lawyer in the face, yet.

‘*No*, he paved the road for your defense,’ Steven says, pointing at him. Another scoff.

‘He didn’t say I’m innocent.’

And that hurts. That really hurts, because I trusted Jack, and he really thinks I’m capable of those things.

‘Innocence isn’t a verdict, Mr Graham.’ Brauer adds a file to the briefcase, and snaps the lid shut. ‘But “not guilty” is.’ Another grin. ‘This isn’t *law*, it’s *advertising*.’

Will growls, and rolls his eyes towards the ceiling. Jesus Christ…

‘Advertising *trivializes*. It manipulates. It’s… *vulgar*.’

And it’s not true.

‘Boo-hoo,’ Steven replies. ‘So is the law.’ He huffs, seeing how upset Will is by this stance, and drops into the chair beside him, leaning in close and dropping his voice in an attempt to make him understand. ‘We have to create desire to find you “not guilty”,’ he explains. ‘Which is non-existent in this courtroom right now.’ He chuckles. ‘We’re manipulating people into buying something they don’t need.’

‘Mr Brauer?’ a paralegal calls for him, handing him an envelope.

‘They don’t want your innocence. Thank you.’ Steven takes it, tearing into the manila as he speaks. ‘Heat-mad unconsciousness in a pretty package, *that* I can sell.’ He winks at him when Will looks skeptical.

Inside the posting envelope is a second, smaller envelope, which Steven rips into without looking at, still speaking to Will.

‘If I take the moral high ground with you, I’ll get you killed.’

He tips the envelope up and flakes of dried blood pour out, like a sick imitation of confetti. And then, in pride of place, a severed ear.

Will looks over with a sense of detached curiosity, even as Steven stares, horrified, at the body part on the table before him.

‘… I think I opened your mail.’

***

Later that afternoon, after Dr Chilton being denied him access to visit Will on the grounds that the Omega “needed rest after such a traumatic morning”, Hannibal consoles himself with a double brandy in his office. Since Jack Crawford has joined him in an equally despondent

mood, he pours a second double for his fellow Alpha, and hands it to Jack with a grim smile. They need this after today.

‘That was a good and brave thing you did for Will today,’ Hannibal says, and Jack holds up his crystal tumbler as though toasting his own idiocy.

‘It may have cost me my job.’

Hannibal tilts his head , watching the other man dip his nose to inhale the scent of the amber liquid. Jack is very calm. Composed, as though a great weight has been lifted from his shoulders. And, at the same time, he seems very tired.

The bull, collapsing at the end of its run, with no more fight left to give.

‘The prospect doesn’t seem to trouble you as much I would have thought,’ he murmurs, and Jack considers this, his eyes sparkling like rubies as he grins.

‘Haven’t felt better in weeks.’

They clink glasses, and Hannibal smiles, pleased that his colleague has found peace. And, if Jack Crawford leaves the FBI, he will abandon his hunt for the Chesapeake Ripper. That suits Hannibal nicely.

‘Clarity will do that.’ He turns away, sipping his drink as he leans against his desk. Jack drinks at the same time, closing his eyes to savor the taste.

‘Mm.’

After a moment of companionable silence, broken only by the soft notes of Beethoven’s Piano Trio, Hannibal speaks again.

‘Tell me, Jack; was your testimony meant to be a resignation?’

Jack hums, and narrows his eyes as he smiles, considering the question.

‘There *is* something appealing about walking away from all of the noise,’ he admits. He lowers himself into the leather armchair behind him – *Will’s armchair* – and shrugs up at the other Alpha. ‘I’m… *content* to let the chips fall.’

Hannibal inclines his head in understanding.

‘The magic door is *always* attractive.’ *Death is another kind of door. How often has Will wanted to step through?* ‘Step through, and leave all your burdens behind.’

Jack sniffs a laugh, shaking his head at himself and staring into the depths of his brandy.

‘I’m given my *life*… to *death*.’

Hannibal lowers his eyes. He understands that this was never about the job, or Will… This is, and will always be, about Bella, Jack’s mate. His Omega; she has Stage 4 lung cancer, and

scant few months left to live.

‘And now death has followed you home,’ he murmurs, striking deep and true. He looks right at Jack, at the wounded, suffering Alpha across from him, and adds, ‘Come to live in your house.’

Jack, his eyes bright with unshed tears, grits his teeth and looks off to the side. He sighs in lieu of replying, not trusting himself to speak yet. After a moment, his throat swallowing with an audible click, he says,

‘Bella has kept our bedroom from looking too much like a sickroom. There are flowers, but not too many, you know?’ He manages a tiny, sad smile. ‘She insists that there are no pills in sight.’ Another pause. A moment to regain his composure. ‘So, I’ve been thinking about taking her to Italy where we met. We could…’

Jack falters, and Hannibal’s suspicion about the *depth* of the fellow Alpha’s despair is confirmed.

‘She could die there,’ Jack amends, glancing up at the psychiatrist.

Hannibal gives him a moment, and then allows a tiny smile to curve his lips.

Such feeling… And yet barely a glimpse of the bond I share with Will.

‘Jack.’ His soft voice draws red-ringed eyes to him again, and Hannibal leans forward, speaking softly. ‘You’re not sick. You don’t have to go into the ground with her.’ Another pause, watching the pain dance in Jack’s eyes. It is beautiful in its own way. Sharp and pure. Hannibal tilts his head. ‘When Bella is lost to you, the FBI could still be there.’

Jack huffs a wobbly laugh, his eyes wet.

‘You’re telling me *not* to commit professional suicide?’

Hannibal opens his palms in a tiny shrug.

‘As a friend, I’m telling you not to force an issue…’ A wry smile. ‘For the short-term, emotional satisfaction it can have.’

Play the long game, Jack. Like Will and I.

***

After their brandies, Jack and Hannibal return to Quantico, and go straight down to the Behavioral Science Unit lab to hear the analysis on the ear. Jack very clearly has to wrench himself back to the present in order to pay attention to Beverly and her team.

‘… shrunken capillaries,’ Zeller says, pointing to the ear in the petri dish before them. ‘The ear was cut no more than forty-eight hours ago.’

‘Before the trial started,’ Beverly says.

‘We fumed it all,’ Price says, looking at both Alphas. ‘Ear’s clean. No prints on either of the envelopes, besides the courier, paralegal and lawyer.’

‘We *know* Will Graham didn’t do it,’ Beverly says, looking at Jack. Slouching back on a stool beside her, Zeller snorts and rolls his eyes.

‘It wouldn’t surprise me.’

‘The timing’s deliberate,’ Jack says, frowning at him. ‘It was choreographed to drop the ear at the beginning of Will’s trial.’

Staring down at the offering, Hannibal purses his lips as his eyes itch to flare red. He feels warmth in his belly, twisting like a great serpent, but he doesn’t recognize the emotion. Anger? Hurt?

I felt this when Tobias Budge challenged me for Will… When he left him the trombonist…

‘Such a gift has great significance,’ he muses, drawing Jack’s attention. The other Alpha turns to him and raises an eyebrow.

‘A gift from *who?’*

‘Will claimed someone else committed the crimes he was accused of,’ Hannibal replies, meeting Jack’s gaze, even when Jack looks surprised, and Beverly swings her head round to stare at him.

‘He said that person was *you*,’ Jack reminds him, but Hannibal merely shrugs. If he can point the FBI at this potential rival, the risk is worth it.

‘Perhaps he was half-right.’

A deafening silence falls on the room. The three Alphas stare at the ear, eyes ringed with crimson at the thought that Will, the Omega in their care, could have been betrayed so completely by them all. Even Price squirms.

Zeller alone scoffs at them all. When he realizes how serious they are, he plants both feet firmly on the floor and throws his hands into the air in defeat.

‘Oh, you *gotta* be kidding me!’

Fucking Alphas!

***

‘In honor of your mother, and the love you felt for her.’

Hannibal holds out a perfectly sculpted prosciutto rose, and Abigail takes it with a smile. The autumn sunlight sets her auburn hair ablaze, and her blue eyes sparkle as she looks out at the view from Eagle Mountain.

‘This was a good idea,’ she says, fiddling with the petals of cured meat so she doesn’t have to look at them. Will knows that she doesn’t want to cry in front of them, and risk ruining their family picnic. Two loving fathers, taking their daughter out to a place of emotional significance.

Abigail sighs.

‘Coming here… All of us together to mark the anniversary,’ she says, nodding her agreement of Hannibal’s suggestion.

The Alpha leans back on his elbows, protected from the pine needles on the ground by Will’s thick picnic blanket. He looks effortlessly elegant in tan trousers and a thick sweater, the sleeves rolled up as he basks in the sun.

‘Time will reduce your mother to bones,’ he says, and Will glances at him, brows furrowing at the sense of *loss* in his mate’s voice. ‘What remains of her is in your head.’

‘You said that about my dad,’ Abigail murmurs, turning to face him. As she does, Will frowns, because there is blood on her shirt and more spilling from a gaping slit in her throat.

No… No, that didn’t happen…

‘Hannibal!’ he gasps, grabbing for the other man. ‘Hannibal, what-?’

‘Will?’

Hannibal’s voice, soft with wonder. The dream changes, and Will feels himself shift towards waking, his Alpha’s body beside him, curled up in the warmth of their bed, lips against lips, legs tangled and hands hugging each other tight.

‘Stay with me,’ Hannibal whispers, but the scene is fading, and Will can feel his prison cot reappearing beneath his back. He can smell bleach, and stale urine, the dampness of old bricks… His own scent, muted by the suppressants, but sugary sweet from the hint of slick pooling between his ass cheeks at the imagined touch of his Alpha…

He opens his eyes, staring up at the water stain on the ceiling above him.

At least I didn’t dream about Hannibal feeding me her ear again…

In his Baltimore townhouse across the city, Hannibal opens his eyes at the very same moment, smiling up at the clear white ceiling of his bedroom.

It worked.

You’re sharing my thoughts, Will. Our bond is growing.

He hums to himself, absently stroking the faint swelling of his scent glands beneath his jaw. Imagines Will’s teeth there, sinking deep and drawing blood, forging his own bond and binding Hannibal to him, just as he has bound the Omega to him…

You'll be ready soon.

He shivers, equal parts nervous and excited, and gets up. He needs to shower and dress; he has an appointment with Will is at ten o'clock, and traffic is always horrendous on a weekday.

Hannibal rolls his shoulders, pleased by how loose the muscles are. He's been awake for hours, but remained in a state of deep relaxation, allowing his emotional bond to widen and call to his Omega. And Will, his own mind open in sleep, had responded perfectly, slipping into the scene to share the picnic with their daughter. A pity Will's fear had twisted it at the end – more proof of his strength – but enjoyable until that final moment.

A glimpse of what could be.

If I were to share genes with anyone, Will, it would be with you…

Hannibal remembers their conversation about children, in the kitchen the evening after Will had accompanied Jack to arrest Laurence Wells. Nearing his heat, his Omega's thoughts had naturally turned to pregnancy, though he had still been surprised that his Alpha wanted to have a family with him.

I want everything with you, Hannibal thinks, staring at his reflection in the bathroom mirror, his maroon eyes gleaming. *I want to share my true self with you, and see your true self in return.*

***

When the door at the end of his ward buzzes, and Hannibal comes to a stop before the bars of his cell, Will almost expects to see him in the outfit from his dream. Instead, his Alpha is dressed in another dark, elegant suit, his coat draped over his forearm and hands clasped before him.

'Hello, Will.'

'Dr Lecter.'

A spark of irritation flickers on Hannibal's face, hidden a moment too late, and Will feels a surge of vicious glee at the fact that, despite allowing Hannibal to be physically close to him, his emotional distance still upsets the Alpha.

He remains on the narrow bed, though, his elbows on his thighs and shoulders hunched. He has a bad headache and feels sick again today, no doubt caused by the stress of the trial. He doesn't want to play games with Hannibal.

'It seems you have an admirer,' Hannibal says, watching Will carefully. His Omega is pale and the tightness in his jaw suggests nausea. The length of his curly hair makes his face look gaunt, and Hannibal's gut clenches at the urge to break his mate out of this place and take him home, where he can recover. Where he can take him off the scent suppressants and bask in his true flavor.

Soon.

‘You think someone sent me an ear because they *admire* me?’ Will scoffs, glancing over at Hannibal. His Alpha shrugs.

‘The boundaries of what’s considered normal are getting narrower,’ he replies. ‘Outside those boundaries, this may be intended as a helpful gesture.’

Or a courting gift.

Will feels his chest tighten, and desperation makes his smile wobble.

‘How far would *you* go to *help* me?’

God. He’s so fucked up.

Hannibal ducks his head, smiling ruefully.

‘It hadn’t occurred to me to send you an ear,’ he admits, though the red flares bright in his eyes as he thinks of a few other ways he could save Will. *A delay if the prosecutor were to go missing… She was terribly rude to Will…* He sees Will ducks his head again, staring at the floor, and feels his disappointment through their bond. He’d *wanted* it to be Hannibal?

The first step in protecting me, to make up for destroying me.

The thought comes swiftly, and Hannibal works hard to keep his voice steady as he adds,

‘But I’m grateful someone has.’

Will grimaces at him.

‘*Gratitude* has a short half-life.’

‘So can doubt,’ Hannibal replies, making Will frown as he explains, ‘I have new thoughts about who you are. There may very be another killer.’

Of course there fucking is, Will thinks, wishing with every fiber of his being that he could just glare at the other man. Instead, he paints an expression of hopeful fear onto his face, allowing his eyes to flood gold for a touch of emotional manipulation as he drops his voice to a whisper.

‘I *want* there to be.’

Despite the vulnerability of Will’s appearance, Hannibal feels the burn of anger through their bond, and he sighs, looking down.

‘Some part of you still suspects *me*.’

Fuck.

Will sighs, trying to salvage the conversation. It's difficult keeping his emotions in check around the other man. Hannibal is so deep inside him, now.

'I don't know what *anyone* is capable of anymore,' he explains. 'Least of all myself.' He drops his head onto white knuckles, his hands pressed tight together. 'But, um…' He swallows, fighting bile at the admission. 'I know there is no evidence against you.'

'There never was,' Hannibal reminds him. Will nods, and looks over at him, cheeks flushed pink and the gold in his eyes no longer a manipulation. He is drowning in despair, and frustration, and so very, *very* confused by the warring emotions whenever he is around his Alpha.

'And accusing you makes me look insane,' he says, summarizing the impossibility of his situation. He shakes his head, biting his lower lip. 'I'm not insane.' Gives Hannibal another pained smile, because they both know that's not always been the case. There's still a hole in his chimney, after all. 'Not anymore.'

Watching his Omega suffer, Hannibal is reminded of Will's strength. The Omega is unbelievably resilient, and every time he accepts the darkness within him, using it to survive this ordeal, he becomes the best possible version of himself. Becomes a mate worthy of an Alpha such as himself.

But he needs to rest, now. Too much and he will break.

'And you may not be guilty,' he says softly, drawing Will out of the pain, providing him with a spark of hope from which to draw comfort and power.

Will sighs, his breath catching, and watches silently as Hannibal draws closer. His Alpha is the only visitor permitted to cross the white line, and comes to stand up against the bars, as close to his Omega as he can get without Will drawing nearer. His thick scent drifts over, and Will feels his shoulders loosen an inch in a grind of muscle at the rich musk.

'This ear you were sent is an opportunity,' Hannibal continues, his voice smooth and low, but eyes alight with fervor. 'If someone else is responsible for your crimes, perhaps he now wants to be seen.'

Will pulls a face.

'Why would he wanna be *seen* now?'

'He cares what happens to you,' Hannibal says, his mouth twisting in distaste. *And, perhaps, he believes he can protect you better than me.*

'Yeah, well, hasn't stopped the trial,' Will replies, rubbing sweaty palms on his knees. He pushes up from the bed to pace the length of the cell, his head throbbing and stomach churning. He can feel the rasp of the jumpsuit against his swollen crest, making him irritable.

Hannibal doesn't move, but his eyes track every step.

'I know,' he murmurs. 'We are due back in court this afternoon.'

‘*We?*’ Will raises an eyebrow at him. ‘You’re an *observer.* Not exactly the same thing.’

‘As your Alpha, I’m on trial as much as you are,’ Hannibal replies, and, for the first time, Will wonders what effect this is having on him. He stops and turns to face him, tilting his head.

‘Are you in trouble?’ he asks, feeling a pang of guilt, quickly repressed.

‘Not as much as Alana,’ Hannibal replies, and the guilt flares hotter than ever. Despite her lack of faith in him, Will still cares what happens to the Beta. She’s still his friend…

‘For helping me hide my identity,’ he mutters. ‘And work at the FBI.’

‘She is working with Omegan Rights Activists, lobbying to repeal Article 62,’ Hannibal says, brushing lint from his coat. ‘The publicity of your case is providing an unprecedented amount of media attention.’

‘I’ll bet,’ Will says dryly. He rubs his face, trying to grind the sand from his eyes. He’s exhausted. ‘What about you? You said you’re not in as much trouble as Alana… Still facing repercussions?’

Hannibal studies his nails.

‘No doubt the prosecution will try to use my bond with you as justification for denying me the right to make statements, either for them or for the defense.’

‘Have you been asked?’

The Alpha glances up, smiling, and says nothing. Will growls at him and turns away, resuming pacing.

‘Freddy *Lounds* is taking the stand today,’ he says, speaking to the ceiling. ‘For the prosecution, of course.’

‘And Alana is preparing to give a statement of defense tomorrow,’ Hannibal says, confirming his knowledge of the trial schedule. ‘Will your lawyer be practicing his questions with her beforehand?’

‘I hope so,’ Will says, worrying at his lower lip again. ‘She’s my best line of defense.’

Not your best line, Hannibal thinks. *I won’t let this go too far, Will. You have my word.* Aloud, he says,

‘How long have you had a headache, Will?’

His Omega turns to him, eyebrows drawn together as he considers the question. A half-shrug, not wanting to dismiss the importance of the question after the intercranial swelling he suffered.

‘It comes and goes,’ he says, squeezing the nape of his neck, just above his crest. ‘I didn’t sleep well last night.’

‘No, I imagine not.’ Hannibal glances behind him and sets his coat on the folding chair stood back against the wall. He returns to the bars and drapes his arms through. ‘Come here.’

Will sighs, but his feet carry him over to his Alpha without delay and he folds himself into the embrace, snuggling as close up to Hannibal’s chest as the cell will allow. He sighs, feeling the tension drain from his body, leaving him light and calm.

‘I hate that you have this effect on me,’ he mutters, knowing that Hannibal will appreciate the truth. He wraps his arms around the other man’s slim waist, and feels his Alpha press a kiss to his forehead.

‘You resent needing me,’ Hannibal murmurs, rubbing his hands up and down Will’s spine, loathing the coarse fabric under his touch. ‘Do you think I resent needing *you?*’

Will snorts, but instead of pulling away like he wants to, he finds himself burrowing ever closer, drinking in the rich, heady smell of his mate’s scent and cologne. He’s *missed* this… It’s been less than a week, but he misses sharing a bed with him. His dream this morning had been so intense, so *real,* it had left him aching.

‘You don’t need me,’ he scoffs, his hands flexing into fists at the base of Hannibal’s spine. ‘Our bond is decidedly *one-sided*.’

‘No, my dear Will,’ Hannibal whispers, kissing him again. ‘You just don’t know your power, yet.’

But you will. And when you ask, I will let you bite me. I will let you bond me.

***

At two o’clock that afternoon, Will finds himself back in the courtroom, wearing his trusty suit and glasses, his Alpha sat three rows behind him and Lilian Vega standing over the table of evidence like a gloating vulture.

‘The prosecution calls Freddy Lounds to the stand.’

The frosted glass doors open, and the diminutive Alpha enters the room. Dressed in mourning black, she covers her fiery red curls with a tilted hat, encases her legs in fishnet tights and hides her hands inside black gloves. The heels of her patent stilettos clack on the marble floor, and she lowers her head to the judge as she approaches the front of the room.

Will watches her walk past, his nausea rising at the smell of her perfume. He really *hates* her.

The Bible is held out for her, and although Will secretly hopes that she will shy away from it, like the vampire that she is, Freddy places a gloved hand onto the cover to take her oath.

‘I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth.’

Devious eyes land on Will, and he makes no effort to hide his loathing as he watches her sit down.

You lie with every breath you take, Freddy.

‘Could you please describe your relationship with Abigail Hobbs?’ Lilian asks, approaching the stand where the smaller Alpha is sitting.

‘We were very close,’ Freddy replies, pitching her voice deliberately soft, lacing it with just the right amount of grief to seem convincing. ‘I was helping her write a book about surviving her father.’

And poisoning her mind against Hannibal and I in the process, Will thinks, feeling his eyes itch gold.

‘Did you ever discuss Will Graham with Abigail?’ Lilian asks, and this is when Freddy *really* starts to act. Her voice wobbles, as though she is fighting tears, and her eyes flash red.

‘Abigail told me…’ A swallow, perfectly timed. ‘… She believed Will Graham wanted to *kill* her and *cannibalize* her, like her father wanted her to do.’

Judge Davis turns his head, blue eyes wide and mouth slack as he stares at Will in horror. Will can’t lift his eyes from the tabletop, feeling the pressure of such revulsion bearing down on him like a boulder.

‘She was right,’ Freddy adds, looking up at the Judge with wet eyes. ‘I should have listened to her.’

‘Do you blame yourself for her death?’ Lilian asks gently, every inch the sensitive Alpha, coaxing a grieving woman to relive something traumatic. And Freddy opens her blue eyes wide, fixing the prosecutor with an expression of utmost sorrow as she replies,

‘I blame Will Graham.’

‘Thank you.’ Lilian smiles, and then turns to Steven Brauer. ‘Your witness.’

Will’s lawyer nods to himself, sitting forwards from where he’d been slouched back, rocking in the chair. He stands, and picks up an evidence folder from the table beside him.

‘Miss Lounds.’ He smiles at her, his eyes like chips of ice. Opens the file, pretending to read the information inside. ‘Could you please, er, *remind* me how many times you’ve been sued for libel?’

An uncomfortable silence. Freddy opens her mouth, glancing uneasily at the Judge, whose body language has just become very attentive. She hesitates, but she knows she is bound to answer, and does in the softest voice possible.

‘Six.’

‘Sorry?’ Steven glances up, pretending not to have heard. Freddy rolls her eyes, but leans forward and repeats,

‘Six.’

‘*Six*...’ Steven nods, humming to himself thoughtfully, still reading from the file. ‘And how many times did you settle?’

How many times have you lied about somebody?

Freddy swallows.

‘Six.’

Judge Davis raises an eyebrow at the lawyers before him, a puzzled look on his face as if wondering why the prosecution brought in such an unreliable witness to the stand.

‘Six…’ Steven smirks, and drops the file with a snap. ‘Thank you.’ He sits, and waves a hand dismissively. ‘Nothing further.’

***

‘The defense calls Dr Alana Bloom.’

Alana takes a deep breath, her shoulders rigid and eyes shuttered as she begins her statement.

‘I believe Will’s Omegan biology…’ A pause to swallow, nervously wetting her lips. ‘… Combined with the effects of a rare form of Heat Prodrome…’ She falters, and looks over at the lawyer. ‘Do we have to do this like this?’

They are doing this in the visitor’s room of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, two hours after Will’s court appointment, amidst the creeping stench of boiled cabbage as the hospital begins dinner preparations.

Will sits in one of the narrow cages, and Alana is on a folding chair behind the safety line. Steven stands, an equally safe distance away from the Omega, facing Alana, his hands in his pockets.

‘I don’t want the first time you do this to be in court,’ he reminds her. Alana lowers her eyes and grits her teeth, submitting to him. Steven moves closer, beginning to circle her, and resumes his questioning. ‘Dr Bloom, weren’t you and the accused romantically involved?’

Alana shoots a worried look at Will, her cheeks flushing pink as she remembers their kiss. Will’s expression is carefully blank, gold-ringed eyes fixed on a point in the air between the bars of his cage and Alana’s red blouse.

‘How is this *relevant* to the case?’ Alana demands, glaring up at the Alpha. Steven shrugs, now moving around behind Will’s cage.

‘It’s relevant to *your* testimony,’ he says. ‘In that court, your feelings, your *emotions*, your everything pro-Will Graham will be on trial. You get all starey and non-blinky like that, it’ll undermine you and me, but mostly *him*.’ He points down to the silent, unmoving Omega.

Alana glares at him.

‘My testimony is based on my professional –’

‘You are *smitten* with the accused, Miss Bloom, and it is *adorable* but *not* our brand of defense.’ Steven shrugs. ‘And Ms Vega will smell it on you like you stepped in Just Presented and *tracked* it into the courtroom!’

He leans down, getting right up into the her face, letting his dominant Alpha scent wash over her, but Alana doesn’t recoil. She meets his gaze steadily and with a quiet confidence not found in many Betas.

‘Were you and Will Graham involved romantically?’ Steven asks, dangerously soft. Alana considers him for a moment, clenching her jaw, and then looks at Will, who carefully keeps his gaze lowered and to one side. It’s easier to be honest if the Omega isn’t looking, after all.

‘I have no romantic feelings for Will Graham,’ Alana says, loud and clear. ‘I have a professional curiosity.’

Brauer scoffs, and Will raises gold-flooded eyes to stare at Alana, at the shuttered face of the woman he’d once called friend.

‘I like that,’ Steven says, nodding to himself. ‘“Professional curiosity”. It seems so…’ He searches for the right word, still circling them both. ‘Huh. It seems so *indifferent.* Unless you look like you’re lying when you say it…’

Alana glances up, worry creasing her brow, and Brauer shrugs.

‘But you didn’t.’

No, Will thinks, hope leeching the gold from his eyes, leaving them dull blue again. *You didn’t.*

***

A call from Beverly that afternoon has Jack hurrying down to the BSU lab to find out what his team have found.

‘You’ve identified the ear?’ he asks, looking at the pleased faces of his Forensics Team.

‘We identified the *knife* that cut it off,’ Zeller says, grinning because they went one better.

‘It’s Will Graham’s,’ Beverly explains. ‘The blade matches the cuts on Abigail Hobbs’s ear and on this one.’ She nods to the ear on the table.

Over in the corner, Price turns from his computer screen, which shows the two severed ears, side by side for comparison.

‘It was presented in court as evidence, then it was sent to the courthouse evidence room, where it was checked out by the bailiff in Will’s trial, Andrew Sykes, and it never went *back*.’

The Beta’s eyes shine with excitement at having found the trail of breadcrumbs, but Jack’s expression is grim. He glances at Zeller, who smirks, nods and holds out a fist to bump.

‘Pretty good, right?’

***

It doesn’t take long to get a warrant for such a high-profile case, and Jack accompanies the tactical team to Sykes’s one-bedroom apartment in Milford Mill, Maryland, shortly after dark.

The moment the officers batter down the door, there is the tell-tale click of a spark being struck, the trickle of gasoline and then a whoosh as air burns hot enough to catch fire. Flames belch out into the evening, the explosion ripping through the building with enough force to shatter windows.

In his car at the side of the road, Jack flinches back from the ball of hot light, his heart racing.

Shit… Suicide, or a trap?

He doesn’t have to wait long. The bomb is designed for theatrics, rather than destruction, and the flames are extinguished quickly. Avoiding the crowd of hovering neighbors and eager reporters – Jack is careful to avoid Freddy’s sharp eyes – he ducks inside, nodding his thanks to the firefighters on their way out.

Floorboards creak beneath his weight, but they hold. The damage is superficial, though the stench is horrendous.

Entering the apartment lounge, Jack finds the source of the smell.

A man’s body, burned to a crisp, impaled on a stage’s head, its face cut in two and, when he leans over, missing an ear.

Jack’s thoughts grind to a halt at what he sees. At what it might *mean*…

Will was… telling the truth?

***

Hannibal arrives at 8.15pm, and Jack greets him at the car before escorting him inside. Beverly and her team are already there, examining the scene, and Hannibal is careful where he steps as his shoes crackle on the singed carpet.

‘They wanted to give us a warm welcome, *and* to make sure that we found something,’ Jack explains, showing his fellow Alpha into the lounge, where the dead body sits on its stag’s head.

‘An arresting piece of theater,’ Hannibal says, staring down at the display.

Crouched by a withered arm, Zeller reaches up to carefully scrape burned flesh away from the brass nametag on the body’s chest. *A. Sykes.*

‘Our bailiff was mounted on a *stag’s* head. Glasgow smile, killer lopped off his ear, *and* set him on fire,’ he says, shaking his head in disgust. ‘Will Graham’s greatest hits.’

‘Could we have been *that* wrong?’ Jack asks, staring with unseeing eyes as guilt eats at his heart. Zeller huffs.

‘About Will Graham? No. We could *not*. He practically takes *selfies* with his victims.’ He pauses, and glances at Hannibal, suddenly remembering that he’s Will’s mate. Hannibal glances at him, one eyebrow raised almost indiscernibly, and the Beta falls silent.

‘The evidence was immediate, and almost presentational,’ Beverly says, stepping in to divert attention from her Beta’s faux-pas. ‘May as well have been gift-wrapped.’

Because it was, Hannibal thinks, watching them sift through the facts with fresh eyes and clear minds.

‘That’s what Will said about Cassie Boyle when we found her in that field,’ Jack says, looking over at her. ‘”Field kabuki”.’

‘There was no evidence *before* Will was apprehended, and there hasn’t been any since,’ Beverly adds, burgundy eyes flicking between Hannibal and Jack. They’re onto something… they have to be.

‘He ate a girl’s ear!’ Zeller protests, staring aghast at the Alphas around him. Slaves to their hormones; they’d do *anything* to protect a simpering little Omega, just because he comes in a pretty package. ‘It was *in* his *stomach!* God *knows* what *else* of her was in there!’

‘We should have taken a stool sample,’ Price muses, nodding at his colleague. Zeller nods enthusiastically, even as Beverly rolls her eyes. She knows where this is headed.

‘Yes! We *should* have!’

‘Well, why didn’t we?’ Price says. ‘*I* was the one that said we should have.’

‘Yeah, and I –’ Zeller splutters, but a low growl and a red eye flash from Jack silences them.

‘Knock it off!’ the Alpha barks, glancing at Hannibal. It is, after all, *his* Omega’s stool sample they are discussing.

Resisting the urge to take the metal tweezers from Beverly and plunge them deep into the Beta’s jugular, Hannibal turns to Jack and dips his head towards him, asking the question

they are all thinking.

‘What impact could this have on Will’s trial?’

A pause. Jack looks down at the corpse, his brow furrowing as he sighs.

Only one way to find out.

***

‘This murder raises serious doubts about the case against Will Graham.’

It’s 9am the next morning and, after very little sleep and a difficult drive over to the courthouse, Jack is in no mood to monitor his words. He speaks plainly to Judge Davis and Kade Prurnell, ignoring the accusing glares of his fellow Alphas.

‘Your *team* provided the evidence,’ Judge Davis reminds him, propping his chin up on his fingers and frowning at Jack over the top of his half-moon glasses.

‘The *overwhelming* evidence,’ Kade adds, red-ringed eyes piercing Jack. He nods, raising his eyebrows.

‘So you understand the significance of my questioning it?’ he replies, but Kade shakes her head, her upper lip curling in disgust.

‘Agent Crawford, we all heard your testimony,’ she says. ‘Are you sure you’re not just trying to assuage your own guilt?’

‘*Yes*, I’m sure,’ Jack says, but Kade shrugs.

‘I’m not.’

Jack’s low growl hangs in the air between them; testimony to his exhaustion.

‘Andrew Sykes was mutilated in the *exact* same manner Will Graham allegedly mutilated his victims. Ways that have *not* been made public!’

‘Will Graham isn’t saying he didn’t kill those people!’ Kade snaps, fighting very hard to keep the rasp of a snarl from her own voice. ‘His lawyer is running an *unconsciousness* defense! In effect, he’s admitting the acts, but just not the responsibility!’

Judge Davis’s calm blue eyes slide from Jack to Kade, like a curious spectator watching a game of tennis. His face remains fixed in a position of deep consideration, his fingers laced together before his pursed lips.

‘Will’s maintained his innocence,’ Jack says, trying another tactic. ‘All along, in spite of memory gaps. Whatever Mr Brauer’s strategy is, this will offer a new line of defense.’

‘That’s for Mr *Brauer* to tell me, Agent Crawford,’ Judge Davis says, his eyebrows rising in warning. ‘Not you.’

Kade nods and tilts her head, submitting to the Judge's authority and greater dominance. Jack's deference is less pronounced; a subtle lowering of the eyes and a half-step back. He doesn't bare his throat the way Ms Prurnell does.

'Yes, Your Honor,' he says. He looks at Kade, who shakes her head at him in disappointment.

Above them, Judge Davis sighs.

'I'll need to think carefully about this,' he says, getting to his feet in a creak of old limbs. 'And speak to Mr Brauer and Ms Vega, of course. I'll let you know once I've made my decision. In the meantime, the trial shall continue, as planned.'

Jack and Kade both nod, their murmured 'Yes, Your Honor' falling on deaf ears as the older Alpha leaves by a side door to return to his office.

Walking out of the courthouse into the chilly morning, Jack takes a deep breath and smells the first hint of spring. A crispness, hinting at new life, damp soil and the first buds of flowers… In a week or two, the square in front of them will be blooming with daffodils.

'You're swimming in very dangerous waters, Jack.' Kade's voice, when she speaks, is cold and sharp. Jack glances at her, and finds Kade's jaw set and eyes flashing red in the slanting sun. 'You can still make this right.'

Watching her walk away, Jack slides his hands into his trouser pockets and takes another deep, calming breath.

Yes, he thinks, wandering down the steps towards the coffee stand near the fountain. *I can. And I will.*

***

'Dark chocolate ganache tart with salted caramel shards and a Dulce de leche drizzle.'

Will's eyes light up at the sight of the dessert. The prosciutto and watermelon roses, salmon and asparagus quiche, game pie and crusty bread in the picnic hamper had been good, but *this* is what he's been looking forward to, ever since the start of the hike up Eagle Mountain.

Hannibal laughs, and places the tart on the blanket between them. He leans over, lean and elegant in his tan trousers and sweater with the sleeves rolled up, and cups the back of Will's head. Strokes his thumb along Will's jawline, dragging through the sweat from the mid-afternoon sun, before kissing him.

'I'll make you a Bourbon Pecan Pie next time,' he whispers, and Will purrs into his lips, both men chuckling at the sound of fake-retching. They break apart and turn as one to look at Abigail. Their daughter grins, her blue eyes sparkling with mirth, and hooks a lock of auburn hair behind her remaining ear.

'Get a room,' she teases, fingers lingering near the cured meat rose Hannibal had made in honor of her mother. She'll bury it up here, and never return. One chapter closed, ready to finally move on.

The Alpha chuckles, his dark eyes gleaming.

‘Why would we hide?’ he purrs, leaning back and inviting Will to snuggle closer. ‘When we have the whole world before us?’

‘Hannibal…’

The dream shifts, and Will moves ever closer to his Alpha. Time isn’t relevant anymore. His eyes are closed, so he concentrates on what he can *feel*, what he can smell and taste and touch.

Silk sheets against his bare skin. Hannibal’s lips at his forehead, whispering words of devotion to him in Italian, French, Lithuanian… Hannibal’s musk, thick with desire, settling like sugar on his tongue.

I’m in our bedroom.

Will blinks, and stares up at the mural ceiling. Baby-faced cherubs and fluffy clouds… Blue sky streaked with pink and orange from the sun… It’s not the ceiling from the Baltimore townhouse, nor his Wolf Trap farmhouse, but it’s *theirs.*

The canopy of the bed has been pulled back, giving him this view, but the rest of the room is fuzzy behind gauzy white curtains, billowing in the breeze from the open balcony doors. Antique dressers and a writing desk… An old leather trunk, stamped with peeling gold letters… And art. So much art…

Hannibal’s mother collected art…

He can hear birds singing in the garden. A woman’s voice, singing a Lithuanian peasant song. And, very faintly, Will can make out the splash of water down below, and a child’s squealing laughter as she is bathed in a copper tub.

Mischa…

‘Will.’

Rolling his head on the pillow, Will has the strangest sense that he is here and not here, all at once. Hannibal lies beside him, propped up on an elbow, his sandy hair falling over his forehead and the corners of his eyes wrinkling with his smile.

‘You’re here,’ the Alpha whispers, reaching out to stroke his cheek in wonder. ‘I took some liberties when creating our home… Do you like it?’

Will doesn’t understand. For a brief moment, he sees a shadow flicker behind Hannibal’s eyes, and he’s very, very cold, the stench of rotten teeth washing over his face. Hannibal’s expression changes, his brows drawing together in concern, and he grips Will’s jaw a little tighter.

‘Stay with me. Stay in this place.’

‘I’m here,’ Will mumbles, reaching up to hold Hannibal’s wrist. Grounding himself in the feel of his skin. It’s so *soft*… ‘Wherever *here* is.’ He swallows, hearing it catch in his throat, and his chest aches.

I love you.

‘I don’t know if I can trust you again,’ Will whispers, searching for the light in Hannibal’s burgundy eyes. ‘You still haven’t shown me who you really are.’

‘I will,’ Hannibal promises, his breath warm on Will’s face. It smells like wine, like *home*, and Will whines, long and low. Bites his lower lip, watching the way his Alpha’s gaze jumps to his teeth, and then nods.

‘You’d better.’

‘When you’re ready,’ Hannibal says, drawing him closer. Towards his heat. ‘You’ll know.’

The room around them fades, taking with it the sound of the child’s laughter and splashing water, until all that’s left is Hannibal and Will. The Alpha and the Omega. A perfect pair, equally matched and balanced.

We will be…

Will arches against Hannibal’s chest, gasping at the feel of the other man’s hair rasping against the stiffening buds of his nipples. They’re extra sensitive, aching to be touched, to be kissed, and he guides Hannibal’s mouth down to his the left bud, over his thundering heart.

‘Bite me.’

His voice is hoarse, lower than he’d expected and thrumming with desire. He sees Hannibal shudder and whines again at the iron-grip his Alpha has on his bicep.

Hannibal rolls Will onto his back and dips his head to his chest, swirling his tongue over the left nipple as requested. He can taste the salt of Will’s sweat, and smell his Omega musk, like sugar and smoke, wild and brutal and *his*.

Taking the tender flesh between his teeth, he increases the pressure until Will mewls above him and then closes his lips around the little nub, sucking up the sweet taste of him.

‘Hannibal…’ Will arches again, not sure whether to raise his chest or his hips. He shivers, his skin pebbling as Hannibal’s big hands spread over his ribs and then down, splayed possessively over his flat stomach. He doesn’t remember how they both ended up naked, but he’s glad they are; he couldn’t stand to have anything between them right now.

‘I’ve got you, *mylimasis*,’ Hannibal says, purring deeply at the way Will writhes beneath him. Where his thigh presses between Will’s legs, he can feel the first dribble of slick escape his Omega’s body, and groans at the *heat* of it against his skin. ‘You’re *mine*, Will.’

‘I’m yours,’ Will gasps, dropping his hands to Hannibal’s silky hair, cradling the back of his head and tugging until Hannibal abandons his glistening nipple and crawls over him. Will

strikes fast, shoving Hannibal flat onto his back and coming after him. His lips meet Hannibal's, bruisingly hard at first before parting and pressing and sucking until there's no air between them. He sucks down the other man's tongue, sliding his own up the slick underside of the muscles and catching it between his incisors, threatening but not biting too hard.

Hannibal groans, winding his fingers in Will's curls and hauling him down against his body. Will spreads his thighs to straddle his hips, crushing Hannibal's hardness between them, his own body = shining with a thin sheen of sweat as his crest swells and pulses with heat.

The ridged scars on the back of his neck throb in time to his heartbeat, and Will knows they'll be flushed dark red, *begging* to be bitten, to be licked and sucked by Hannibal. He rolls his pelvis, rubbing his cock against Hannibal's, the feel of his balls absurdly erotic as they rub against the soft skin of the other man's.

Dipping down, he kisses Hannibal again, hands flat on his Alpha's broad chest and massaging the quivering muscles he finds there. He strokes over the sharp collarbone and then kisses a trail of affection across Hannibal's jaw, dipping beneath his chin to rest, deceptively light, on his jugular.

'And you're mine,' Will whispers, teasing the skin with his teeth. Hannibal purrs, long and low, and Will feels something clench inside, spilling fresh slick from his body. His Alpha tastes and smells so *good* here, right here, where a little gland is swelling…

'Not yet, Will.'

Strong hands push him up, so that he's sitting above Hannibal. Will growls, baring his teeth, but his Alpha ignores him. Just rocks his hips up, distracting the Omega with the feel of pressure against his wet hole. Will sucks in a sharp breath and whimpers, closing his eyes as he drops his head back to bare his throat in surrender. He shivers again when Hannibal growls another purr, and fumbles behind him for the hardness he so desperately wants inside him.

'Hannibal…'

'Tell me what you want,' Hannibal says, placing his hands on Will's hips, fingers settling into familiar grooves on the creamy skin. The bruises have faded, but he remembers them well. Marks of ownership, branding Will as *claimed*.

'Hannibal…' Will chokes back a desperate mewl, shoving down against the Alpha's groin. He can't move much, given the punishing grasp on his body, but maybe… Maybe…

'*No*,' Hannibal warns, grinning up at the struggling Omega. '*Tell* me.'

'Fuck me!' Will gasps, staring down at him with gold-flooded eyes. 'Hannibal; please, fuck me.'

'*That's* better.' Hannibal smiles, and slides his right hand across, wrapping it firmly around Will's burning erection. The other man jolts, hips jumping forwards at the touch, and Hannibal licks his lips at the sight of the glistening tip. He gathers up the wetness, using it to

smooth the rub back down, squeezing tight and then barely tickling the tender flesh on the way up, rubbing the pad of his thumb over the throbbing slit.

Will groans, his ribs heaving as he squirms on Hannibal's lap. His hands burn where he leans down on Hannibal's shoulders, lifting up onto his thighs enough that his Alpha can get his other arm around and tease at the tight ring of muscle with two fingers.

'There?' Hannibal breathes, molten, starving eyes fixed on Will's face.

'Please,' Will whimpers. He forgets how to breathe for just a moment when Hannibal slides two fingers inside him, right up to the knuckle, filling him tight and stretching him enough to ache. The amount of slick stops any sting, but it's been a while.

I've missed this so much…

Neither man knows where the thought came from, but they both moan their agreement. Will drops his head, kissing Hannibal as though the Alpha can keep him alive, trapped between Hannibal's clever hands. Another shudder, thighs trembling as he jerks at the pleasure crackling up his spine.

'Alpha…'

'I've got you,' Hannibal promises, crooking his fingers and pulling them back. Will's body tightens around him, reluctant to let him go, and the silky flesh drags until he's almost all the way out. His Omega makes the most delicious noises when he's being tortured, and Hannibal allows himself a few shallow thrusts, *just* to make Will quiver and sob, before he plunges back inside.

Will bucks, his nails digging crimson half-moons into Hannibal's shoulders as he grips him tight, riding out the fire burning through his belly. Another kiss, wet as they pant against swollen lips. Hannibal's fingers leave him and Will gulps, feeling his body clenching around nothing. Another gush of slick, oozing down his inner thighs before Hannibal gathers it up.

Rubbing tingling wetness up and down his erection, Hannibal clenches his jaw against the sudden swoop of pleasure. Omegan slick is a very particular aphrodisiac for Alphas, triggering enough of a rut that they have the strength and stamina to fuck their mate wherever and whenever they are. One of the many reasons it's a highly prized sex drug on the black market.

Taking himself in hand, Hannibal adjusts Will's position to ensure the best angle and then begins to push. There's a moment of resistance, followed by a sharp gasp from Will, and then the other man's body parts for him and Hannibal is engulfed by hot, silky wetness.

'Fuck!'

Will captures Hannibal's face between his hands and kisses him again, rolling his hips down to take it all, every inch, until skin slaps against skin and he's so full, so *complete*, he can't remember ever being without this. Ever being without Hannibal inside him.

I love you.

Another thought, rippling between them as their minds blur. It's difficult to tell where one person ends and the other begins, now, but Will doesn't care. All he cares about is the feel of Hannibal moving inside him, pulling back with a sickening drag and then pushing back in, rubbing against his prostate and sending tendrils of white bliss through him.

Will's tears splash onto Hannibal's cheeks, and he frees his hands to wipe them away. They are cupping each other's faces as they move, so close and so tight that they share breath, sucked in between desperate kisses, drowning without each other. Hannibal grips Will's curls, hauling him even closer, and then slides his hand down to squeeze his crest, flooding his body with endorphins.

The second Hannibal's fingers touch the ridges on the nape of his neck, Will shatters. The strength of his orgasm rocks his very foundations, ripping something from inside him in a way he hadn't expected. It's so sudden, so pure and clean and bright that he can't help but cry. Cry at the feel of it, at what it means, and at how much it's going to *hurt* when he wakes up.

Because he knows this is a dream. He *knows*. He's floating somewhere between worlds, where nothing bad can touch him. His river flows outside, waiting for him to start fishing, and in here, he can't be killed.

In here, Hannibal would never hurt him.

'Stay with me,' Hannibal whispers, rubbing salt into Will's cheeks, trying to ground him. His hips still, his own climax forgotten as sadness sweeps through their bond, so sharp that it makes his heart stumble. 'Will… Stay with me.'

Back in his cell, Will opens his eyes. His cheeks are damp, his chest heaving, and, as he comes fully awake, he can't stop himself from curling up into a tight ball, hugging his knees to his aching chest and sobbing into them.

It wasn't real. I'm still here, and Hannibal still betrayed me.

He bites his knuckles until he tastes blood, refusing to make a sound that could call attention to him. Flinches back against the stone wall when the door buzzes, and hurries to wipe his blotchy cheeks as the sour-faced Alpha returns with his suit.

'Fifteen minutes,' the Orderly says, ignoring the sharp tang of Omegan distress, and the gold eyes that stare back at him from the shaking man. 'You can eat something when we get back.'

He hooks the suit onto the bars and trudges away, taking all the oxygen with him. Will stares at the plastic covering, the white piping reminding him, painfully, of the billowing white curtains of his dream.

It hadn't felt like a dream… Not really… But he hadn't been awake, either…

Sitting up, Will grimaces when he feels his prison suit stick to his thighs and crotch. Fantastic… No doubt Dr Chilton will have some *fascinating* insights when he finds out Will's been having wet dreams.

He groans, rubbing at the drying tears on his face. *Fuck*. Chilton's taking the stand today… God only knows what bullshit he'll spin. Anything to keep Will here, under his observation.

Standing up, he strips down to his boxers and goes to the sink. Fills it with cold water and washes as best he can, cleaning himself off with a rough cloth before applying the deodorant Matthew gave him.

The wiry Alpha still hasn't been back to work, yet. Will huffs and the corner of his mouth curls into a lopsided grin when he imagines Hannibal's reaction to discovering that another Alpha has been providing his toiletries… How *jealous* his mate would be…

'Two minutes, Mr Graham.'

The guard's voice drags him out of his thoughts, and Will hurries to pull the suit through the bars. Yanks on his trousers, buttons his shirt and knots the tie in a quick double before shrugging into the blazer. Glasses on, to protect him from the world.

He's lacing his shoes when the Orderly returns.

It's time.

***

Entering the courtroom, Hannibal's eyes dismiss every other person in the room until they come to rest on Will.

His Omega is visibly shaken, hunched down in his seat with dark shadows beneath his eyes. He glances up when he feels his Alpha's gaze on him, but the longing and anguish in the thick gold-ringed irises is too much for him, and Hannibal looks away. He takes his seat, pressing a hand to his stomach, feeling an echo of Will's nausea and bone-deep anxiety.

Frederick is making his statement today. This, of all the testimonies, could prove to be the most damning.

We were happy, Hannibal thinks, smoothing out invisible creases in his trousers before lacing his fingers together on his knee and forcing himself to stillness. *You found me in our memory palace, our room together, and we were happy, for a while.*

'All rise for the Honorable Judge Davis.'

Hannibal sighs, and gets to his feet in unison with the forty-seven Alphas and one Omega in the room.

I will find you there again, Will. I'll teach you.

***

His river is better than any bedroom his mind could conjure. Will flicks his wrist back, concentrating on the rush of water between his legs, the call of birds in the air and the mist kissing his face.

I should bring Abigail here, he thinks, easing the line into the current. *She'd like it.*

Outside, in the courtroom, Dr Frederick Chilton is speaking in his professional capacity as the psychiatrist currently caring for the Omega on trial.

'Will Graham manifests publicly as an introverted personality. He would like us to believe that he is unusual for an Omega, preferring solitude and isolation, yet he *also* claims an empathy disorder.'

'You choose your words *very* carefully, Dr Chilton.' Lilian Vega's voice is honey-smooth, and she smiles her shark smile as she approaches her fellow Alpha. 'You chose the word "claims".'

Dr Chilton's sharp blue eyes land on Will, a puzzled frown drawing his brow together at the utterly distant, almost *bored* expression on the Omega's face. He wants to shake him, or say something to goad a reaction.

'Will Graham has never been diagnosed. He will not allow anyone to *test* him.' Nothing. Chilton swallows a growl, and tries again, gripping his silver walking cane just a little more tightly. 'He has carefully constructed a persona to hide his real nature from the world. He wears it so well, even Jack Crawford could not see past it.'

A row behind Hannibal, on the other side of the aisle, Kade Prurnell's gaze flicks towards Jack, and then to Hannibal himself, as though curious what the two men will make of Dr Chilton's testimony.

Hannibal sits quietly, letting the words wash over him. In his mind, he can see Will in the river, birdsong in the air and nothing but the fish to think about.

My darling boy… This will all be over soon.

He hadn't expected it to be so difficult.

Jack's jaw tightens and his eyes flash red, but he manages to suppress his growl. Lilian Vega smirks.

'But you did?' she asks, sauntering ever closer. Dr Chilton smiles, his eyes gleaming burgundy as he replies savagely,

Mr Graham and I had no personal relationship for him to manipulate. I have *objectively* examined him, *and* the crimes of which he is accused.' He looks up to the Judge, who considers him quietly. 'These murders were measured and controlled,' Chilton continues. 'The confused, vulnerable Omega Will Graham presents to the world could *not* commit those crimes.'

True, Hannibal thinks, agreeing, perhaps for the first time, with Fredrick. But then the smaller Alpha adds,

'Because *that* man is a fiction.'

Oh, Frederick… Hannibal hides his smirk, but he allows his eyes to gleam at the other man's idiocy. *Blinded by pride.*

The current in the river is strong, but Will can feel the change in the line when he gets a bite. He smiles, pride blooming in his chest, and sets about reeling the trout in.

'So, you discount the Prodromal Phasing he was suffering as a cause?' Lilian Vega asks, leaning an elbow on the bench before Dr Chilton. Intimate and confidential, as though this isn't staged for the room at large.

'He managed his illness, with the help of his *Omega Specialist*, whom he murdered for his trouble,' Dr Chilton replies, shrugging to the wider court.

Lilian hums, and turns to advance on Will, frowning down at him with her arms crossed.

'Is Will Graham an intelligent psychopath?'

Frederick huffs.

'There is not yet a *name* for whatever *Will Graham* is.'

Hannibal refrains from moving, but he can sense his own rapt attention. Frederick is, after all, now talking about him, and he is curious to know how the other man perceives his work.

'He kills methodically, and I believe would kill again, given the opportunity.'

Quite true. Hannibal glances at his mate and sighs through his nose. *But that does not bode well for Will's case.*

'Thank you, Dr Chilton.' Lilian smirks at Brauer. 'Your witness.'

Steven rises, and buttons up his suit jacket.

'Dr Chilton, Will Graham spent his time catching murderers for the FBI. You don't see a contradiction between *that* and your description of a cold-blooded killer?'

Chilton smiles, his eyes glinting.

'No, I do not. Will Graham is driven by vanity and his own whims.' He looks down at the Omega again, wishing he could get inside that head of his. *You should have let me test you, Will. It could have saved you all this trouble.* 'He has a very high opinion of his intelligence. Ergo, he caught the other killers simply to prove that he was smarter than all of *them*, too.' The Alpha shifts his gaze to Brauer and smiles. 'Saving lives is just as arousing as ending them,' he says softly. 'He likes to play God.'

Hannibal closes his eyes, recalling his memory of his session with Will, right after the Omega shot and killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs. The tension had hung between them, thick with everything unspoken. Hannibal remembers sensing something different in Will, a *hunger* to match his own, and then Will had twisted his hands together, taking a shaky breath before speaking the beautiful truth.

'I… *liked* killing Hobbs…'

Oh, how Hannibal remembers the feeling of pride blossoming in his chest. How his dark dragon had rumbled its approval, and, as a reward for Will's courage and honesty, he had reached for him. Locked eyes with Will as the Omega stared at him in shock when Hannibal laced their fingers together; a bridge across the empty space between them.

'Killing must feel good to God, too,' he'd said, speaking softly so as not to scare him. The callouses on Will's hand had surprised him, but the skin around them was soft, and so, *so* hot… *Not nearly as hot as it could be*… 'He does it all the time. Are we not created in His image?'

Will had been humming with tension, charged and excited, and Hannibal had held him gently but firmly, offering him safety and stability.

Will's mouth curved into a deliciously lop-sided smile when he snorted a laugh.

'That depends who you ask.'

I am not interested in the opinions of sheep.

'God is terrific,' Hannibal had replied, staring deep into Will's eyes, allowing a hint of red to warm his irises. He wants him to understand. Needs him to. 'He dropped a church roof on thirty-four of his worshippers last Wednesday night in Texas, while they sang a hymn.'

His words had a clear effect on the Omega, and he had watched Will shiver. Even in the memory, Will smells incredible, and Hannibal remembers *aching* to do more than just hold his hands, feeling a sharp pang when Will had shifted forwards until he was perched on the very edge of the seat.

'And did God feel good about that?' the Omega had whispered, his voice thick.

Hannibal hadn't been able to stop the tremor from running through him. Will's scent was, and still is, strong; it flowed from him, heady and powerful. Hannibal had felt drunk with it. He wanted to stand up, drag Will from the chair, walk him back towards the ladder or the desk and claim his mouth with his own, dip his tongue inside the other man's mouth until he has tasted every part of it, *owned* every part of it, and then dip lower, tearing away the ugly clothes to reveal the porcelain perfect body beneath…

'He felt powerful.'

I feel powerful. You make me feel powerful.

The memory slows. Sharpens. Hannibal remembers the promise that had hung between them, like a shimmering golden thread. Barely a whisper. Something so young and tender that it has yet to form.

Potential.

So much potential in Will. So much darkness, and power. Raw, unfettered… As yet unrealized.

Hannibal remembers standing, drawing Will closer, step by step, testing the boundaries of what the Omega would allow.

Will clung to him like a lifeline, their bodies pressed flush together. Heat had radiated from him and, as a sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead, he had begun to purr.

In the courtroom, Hannibal smiles to himself. His eyes are open now, watching as Steven continues to battle with Dr Chilton, who is determined to paint Will in the ugliest light possible.

Omegan purrs, *true* purrs, not the sounds designed to soothe or placate, were subconscious and rare, triggered only by intense happiness and trust. That may well have been the moment Hannibal fell in love with Will Graham. Truly in love with him. When he realized that this fledgling monster saw something trustworthy in him, even if it was only instinctive for now.

He had cupped the back of Will's head, and, unable to resist, rubbed his thumb across his neck to feel the vibrations. Dipped his head and pressed a feather-light kiss to Will's hairline as he wrapped his arms tighter around him… A test, to see just how far Will was willing to let him go.

And Will, his perfect boy, had melted against Hannibal's chest, his arms coming up to hug tight around Hannibal's waist. He'd sighed, his scent sweetening to the point of sugar, a hint of slick rising between them.

Hannibal could feel the heat radiating from his neck, but he didn't push his advantage. He'd settled for resting his cheek on top of Will's head, giving him simple comfort as he stroked a finger up and down his spine, eliciting the most delicious quiver from the other man.

Right there, he had decided to take him apart, and unleash the true monster inside the man. To free Will from the shackles of his own conscience.

I will break you. And then, when you are ready… I will save you.

***

After the trial, Will is returned to the hospital, and Hannibal must wait until the lunch service has finished before visiting.

A guard shows him into the private interview room, where his precious Omega is shackled to the metal table, waiting for him. Try as he might, Will cannot help but tense when Hannibal enters the room, a fact that the Alpha notices with a twinge of regret.

I will make you trust me again.

Draping his coat on the chair beside him, Hannibal sits and opens the folder before him. He removes a photograph, the silence oppressive between them, and slides it across the table towards Will.

‘My admirer?’

Will’s voice is low and rasping; unease rolls from him as he stares down at the crisped, disfigured corpse impaled on a stag’s head.

‘Yes,’ Hannibal replies, and he sees the sick look quickly hidden behind Will’s serene mask. Feels new pride bloom within him at his Omega’s adaptability.

You’re learning.

But Will is tired; the shadows beneath his eyes beg for sleep, and Hannibal gives him a reprieve by returning to the folder. In truth, all he wants to do is climb over the table and cradle Will in his arms, snap these chains and take him home, where he’ll be safe and warm and loved.

‘The forensic report from the crime scene,’ he says quietly, laying it out between them. ‘What do you see?’

Will takes a deep, shaky breath, his chain rattling through the ring as he reaches for the paper. Reads it quickly and dispassionately before setting it down, his lips tight. Returns to the photograph, holding it between his fingertips like it’s something dirty.

As he watches, Hannibal smells the change in Will’s scent. His Omega grows still, waiting, like a tiger preparing an ambush. His scent thickens, grows smoky, and Hannibal can almost *see* the pendulum swinging behind Will’s blue-gold eyes.

That’s it… That’s my boy…

Will closes his eyes. The dark current rises, heat pooling between his legs and slithering up his spine as he sinks deeper into his shadow. Into his darkness.

A breath. Two thuds of his heart. The pendulum swings and then…

He’s there.

Hannibal can feel Will’s excitement. His *hunger*.

In his mind, Will hears the click of the apartment door. Footsteps. He stands. He’s been waiting for hours, but he is patient. Alphas are hunters, after all, and he’s the best there is.

The Beta, Andrew Sykes, pulls up short when he sees him, shock plain on his face. When he speaks, Will hears his voice as a flat, emotionless thing. Not part of him. Not part of anyone.

‘I shoot My Sykes once, collapsing lungs, tearing through his heart’s aorta and pulmonary arteries.’ He lifts the gun and pulls the trigger without hesitation. Tilts his head, watching the other man stagger. ‘He will die believing we were friends.’ A vicious glee. Pride at his own cleverness. ‘It is his last thought.’

And then he strikes. He grabs Andy and lifts him, turns and, with all of his wiry Alpha strength, he throws him onto the sharp antlers of the stolen stag’s head, impaling him.

For Will.

‘His death isn’t personal,’ he continues, collecting the evidence bag that Andy got for him. Pulls on his vinyl gloves so as not to leave a fingerprint and removes the knife.

Will’s knife. The Omega’s scent still clings to the handle, and he dips his head to sniff it. Savors its sweetness.

Mine.

Carving through Andy’s face is easy. The knife is sharp. Will leans over and grips Andy’s ear, carving through the tissue connecting it to his head as he continues,

‘He is merely the ink from which flows my poem. My tribute.’

My offering.

‘This is my design.’

Taking a sharp breath, Will wrenches himself from the reconstruction and finds himself back in the room with Hannibal. It’s easier to ground himself with the other man’s scent; his rich musk and cedarwood cologne smell like home, like *safety*, and his shoulders loosen in a series of pops and crunches.

‘Well, it’s not the same killer,’ he sighs, setting the photograph down. ‘He murdered his victim first, and then mutilated him.’ Sits forward, noting the disappointed look on Hannibal’s face, but the proud gleam in his eyes. He likes watching think like a killer. ‘Cassie Boyle’s lungs were removed when she was still *breathing*,’ Will growls, his shadow reaching across the table and rubbing itself up against Hannibal’s darkness like a cat. ‘Georgia Madchen was burned *alive*. What I…’ He pauses, swallows sharply and his eyes flicker gold. ‘What… what I *found* of Abigail was cut off while her heart was still beating.’

Hannibal grimaces, turning his face away. Will ignores the urge to apologize, to calm him, though he’s certain his hormones are strong enough that some can slip past the suppressants and ease the Alpha’s discomfort.

‘Then this… is blunt reproduction?’ Hannibal asks, and Will narrows his eyes.

‘You knew that already.’

Hannibal huffs, and lowers his gaze.

‘Would have liked to have been wrong.’

Just because it’s not this killer, doesn’t mean it’s me.

‘Occam’s broom,’ Will murmurs, grimacing at him. ‘You intentionally ignored facts that refute your argument, hoping nobody would notice.’

Hannibal shrugs, smiling sadly.

‘*You* noticed.’

‘Mm-hm.’ Will nods, clenching his teeth. Anger fills his eyes with gold, and Hannibal swallows, lowering his gaze in an expression of surprisingly convincing remorse.

‘I wanted to dispel your doubts once and for all,’ his Alpha murmurs, the sadness in his voice making pain claw at Will’s chest. His lower lip trembles, and he has to swallow before he says, shakily,

‘My doubts about what?’

‘Me,’ Hannibal whispers, dark eyes rising to meet Will’s. He reminds Will of his dream, of being held by him, cherished, given everything because he is the person Hannibal loves most in this world.

You fed me Abigail’s ear… You fed me her ear…

Will has to fight to hold onto the anger. Seeing Hannibal like this… He doesn’t know how to feel.

‘I want you to believe in the best of me,’ Hannibal says quietly, rubbing a finger over the knuckles of his other hand. Hands that, in Will’s dream, stroked him reverently and squeezed his crest until he exploded in pure bliss. Hannibal purrs, long and low. ‘Just as I believe in the best of you.’ He swallows again. ‘This crime offered us both reasonable doubt.’

‘It offered us a *distraction*,’ Will replies, absurdly protective over his Alpha. He has a feeling that Hannibal genuinely means what he’s saying – that he wants Will to approve of him, to *like* him… Even after all he’s done.

Because you did it to help me. To make me stronger.

His thoughts aren’t his own anymore. Will clamps down on the stray ideas and turns his full attention back to the case at hand. His own situation, his trial, is more important than Hannibal’s motivations right now.

Hannibal sighs, and looks off to the side.

‘Maybe this acolyte is giving you your path to freedom,’ he suggests, hope lighting up his eyes. ‘Even Jack is ready to believe, Will.’

Will stills, realizing what Hannibal means. What the Alpha is saying. He sits back, moving slowly as though wary of triggering a chase instinct, holding his hands still so as not to rattle the chain too much.

‘It would be a lie.’

Hannibal looks down, acknowledging the reply. Grimaces at the folder before fixing maroon eyes on the cuffs at his mate’s slender wrists. He hates them. Hates what they represent…

‘I don’t want you to be here,’ he confesses, his voice tight.

Will hears a whine catch in his throat, and sees Hannibal’s muscles jump as the Alpha fights the urge to comfort him. He scoffs, his hands curling into loose fists.

‘I don’t want me to be here, either,’ he says, blue-gold eyes locked on his mate’s face. Hannibal stares at him, burgundy eyes all but *glowing* as he drinks in Will’s expression, the delicate features and unruly mop of curls…

‘Then you have a *choice*,’ he whispers, begging Will with every part of him. ‘This killer wrote you a poem… Are you going to let his love go to waste?’

Will is silent for a long moment, conflicting emotions warring for dominance inside him. His shadow cries for him to use the lie, to twist it until he’s free and can be with Hannibal again, but the rest of him, the *man*, knows how futile that would be. And how wrong. How dangerous.

You did this to me… And now you regret your actions…

What he says, though, when he speaks, takes them both by surprise.

‘You think he loves me?’

Hannibal blinks, carefully pulling his anger behind his mask. Clears his throat and clasps his hands on the table before him, the picture of a calm, controlled Alpha. Certainly not an Alpha threatened by a stranger.

‘Such an act of violence suggests a depth of feelings beyond simple admiration,’ he replies. ‘What else would you call it?’

Will’s heart squeezes tight behind his ribs and then begins to beat very fast. He can feel hot tingles spread throughout his body, right up to his scalp. His crest throbs, stinging as it swells up and rubs against the collar of his jumpsuit.

Love… I have another Alpha who loves me…

He pauses, taking note of his thought. His choice of words. Another…

Hannibal loves me.

It's the truth. As uncomfortable as it is, he knows it's real. Hannibal, in his own way, is genuinely doing this from a place of love.

That doesn't make it okay.

Will glances up, seeing the other man watching him carefully. Hannibal is studying him, trying to catch a glimpse behind the veil.

'It seems you have another rival,' Will murmurs, one corner of his mouth curving into a tiny, dark smile when he hears the low rumble of a growl in Hannibal's throat. His Alpha's eyes flash crimson, and Will makes no effort to repress his own whimper. Calling Hannibal to him, to protect and fight for him.

'*I* claimed you, Will,' Hannibal breathes, rising smoothly and prowling around the table. 'You're *mine.'*

Will shivers, pushing his chair back an inch and turning towards Hannibal. He spreads his legs, allowing Hannibal to stand between his knees, and tips his head back so that he can look up at him. At his fierce, strong mate… His other half.

'You *did* claim me,' he murmurs, tilting his face towards the outstretched hand. Hannibal cups his cheek, stroking his beard, and then fits his fingers around Will's throat in a gesture of dominance and ownership. Will hums, slanting a heavy-lidded glance upwards and licking his lips.

'You're *mine*,' Hannibal repeats, leaning down and capturing Will's mouth in a punishing kiss. He winds his other hand through Will's hair, holding him still, and rubs his throat and cheek all over Will's jawline, down his neck and onto his shoulder, scent-marking him when they part for air.

'For now,' Will whispers, tugging on the chains in a futile attempt to get free, to wrap his arms and legs around his Alpha and be carried out of here. He shudders when Hannibal snarls, and sucks in a sharp, mewling breath when his Alpha's teeth pierce the tender flesh of his throat. Heat swarms him, flooding his spine as his crest pulses, and he squirms as slick wets his boxers. After his dream, his body is all too eager to respond to his mate's touch.

Hannibal sucks a livid bruise into the side of Will's neck, cradling the back of his skull and supporting his head with the strong grip under his jaw. He knows better than to touch Will's crest – they don't have the privacy for that, and Will would not appreciate being made to lose complete control of himself in front of the guard outside, but he cannot resist slipping his hand from Will's windpipe to his chest, sliding beneath the dark cotton of the jumpsuit to spread across the soft cotton of his t-shirt beneath. His long fingers catch a nipple, the same one from their shared dream this morning, and Hannibal rolls and pinches it until Will moans, rocking his hips up in a desperate bid for friction.

'Easy,' Hannibal purrs, releasing Will's neck with a lingering kiss on the damp skin. Smiles at the ring of red teeth marks around mottled purple skin, and withdraws his touch, leaving Will shaking and swaying in the chair, thoroughly disheveled and utterly *magnificent*. 'You'll always be *mine*, Will.'

‘A pair bond is not infallible, Dr Lecter,’ Will mutters, gazing up at him with swirling gold eyes. ‘And it’s not permanent.’

Hannibal swallows, releasing a long, low purr before he can stop himself, and Will sighs, and visibly relaxes as the sound soothes him. The Omega curls inwards, cuddling up against his Alpha when Hannibal steps up to hug him, and Hannibal enfolds his smaller body as completely as he able, wishing he could rip the chains from the ring and loop Will’s arms around his waist.

Resting his cheek on the top of Will’s head, he closes his eyes against the red pounding his eyelids. Killer red. Red with the urge to hunt down this rival Alpha and destroy him.

I will never let you go, Will. I will never let anyone take you from me. You’re mine.

***

‘I’m confused.’

It’s early the next morning, and Alana has arrived with Steven Brauer because there’s an update on the case.

Will sits across from her, once again chained to the interview table, in the privacy of the glass-walled room. Steven lounges in the corner, his arms crossed, leaning against the wall.

Alana tries again, her blue eyes fixed on Will’s closed, emotionless face, desperately trying not to linger on the dark bruise at his throat. An Alpha’s bite. *Hannibal’s* bite.

‘You’re going to abandon your defense strategy… the *entire* case you’ve built… mid-trial.’

‘Exciting, isn’t it?’ Steven says, his eyes gleaming. Alana frowns, and turns to face him.

‘And this seems *reasonable* to you?’

‘It’s not only reasonable,’ Steven replies, pushing off from the wall and wandering closer. ‘It’s fashionable.’ He shrugs and grins as he takes the seat beside Alana. ‘There’s a killer on the loose, demonstrating all the hallmarks of Will Graham’s alleged murders.’

Alana swings wide blue eyes back to Will, who drops his own to the table to avoid her gaze.

‘Do you think this killer committed the crimes you’re accused of?’ the Beta asks, softening her voice to coax an answer from Will. Before the Omega can even *think* of responding, however, Steven holds up a hand.

‘Don’t answer that,’ he barks. ‘Not in front of me. It’s inconsequential.’

‘But is it *true?’* Alana demands, glaring at him again. Steven scoffs.

‘You’re being awfully high and mighty, Dr Bloom. Very ivory tower. Very *reductive*.’ The Alpha leans closer, dominating her space, and Alana lowers her head, her knuckles white as

she clasps her hands before her mouth. ‘Very far from the *point*,’ Steven adds, ‘Which is the exoneration of your friend, and the Omega in *your* care; Will Graham.’

‘And the point you’re trying to make is reasonable doubt,’ Alana replies. Will looks away, staring at the weak grey light filtering through the frosted window glass hidden behind thick iron bars.

I missed dreaming about Hannibal last night… Woke up with a headache again… Do I have to be so dependent on him?

‘That’s a win, yes,’ Steven says. Alana shakes her head.

‘The best you can hope for is mistrial.’

‘That’s also a win,’ Steven reminds her. Alana ignores him, and leans closer towards Will.

‘You won’t be able to plead unconsciousness again,’ she says, desperation cracking her voice. Steven sighs.

‘Your fast, triumphant diagnosis of unconsciousness was the best play we *had*,’ he explains. ‘Now, we have a *better* play. Needless to say, I won’t be calling you to the witness stand.’

Alana’s glare turns to one of shock, but she is quick to recover, and frowns at him again. Protective as ever.

‘Who’s taking the stand in my place?’ she demands, and Steven’s smile widens into a pure Cheshire cat grin.

‘Hannibal Lecter.’

***

At 2.15pm that afternoon, sitting at the defense table of the Baltimore State courtroom, Will’s belly writhes with nerves for the first time since his trial began.

Hannibal is going to testify. Hannibal is going to take the stand, and present evidence on his behalf.

Hannibal is going to save him.

‘The defense calls Dr Hannibal Lecter.’

Will shivers at the call, and can’t help but turn his head as he hears his Alpha’s tell-tale footsteps. Controlled. Measured.

A hunter’s gait.

His shadow whispers sweet nothings into his ear, slithering between his ribs to thicken with every beat of his heart. Will’s eyes flicker gold and he feels sweat dribble down his spine, dampening the hem of his trousers.

I wish I'd accepted the suit he bought me…

Hannibal moves past Will without acknowledging him, but he feels his Omega's burning gaze on the back of his neck as he steps up to the witness stand beside the judge. His face remains impassive, but his eyes gleam as he sets his palm down onto the Holy Bible, ready to be sworn in.

Freddy knew to wear gloves…

Will has the absurd idea that he hears flesh sizzle when Hannibal's hand touches the Bible. It's barely a second, a blink and it's gone, just his imagination, but he shivers again, feeling a block of ice settle in his gut.

This is a really bad idea…

Hannibal's eyes glint at the warmth in his hand. Will has a very vivid imagination, after all.

'I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me, God,' he purrs, as enchanting as a snake charmer. Will's shadow swells, melting into his bones, filling him until he sees the truth behind the mask.

His demon stands before him, dressed as a man, but not a man. It has wicked horns and pitch-black skin. Gaunt cheeks below blank, staring eyes, and hollow ribs caging shriveled organs behind Italian suits. And a hunger, an *endless* hunger, an insatiable thirst for *everything*… Everyone…

The devil comes in many forms…

Hannibal sits, crossing one long leg over the other, his hands clasped in his lap, the picture of ease. He exudes confidence, and Steven smiles as he approaches him.

'Good morning, Doctor. Please describe your relationship with Will Graham.'

'I'm his Alpha,' Hannibal says simply, checking to see whether Will responds to the spoken claim. His Omega is staring at a fixed point before him, and faint birdsong fills Hannibal's mind. Will is trying to escape, to fish, but Hannibal's voice keeps pulling him back.

He smiles.

'He is my Omega. My mate.'

Steven hums and nods.

'And how did you meet him?'

'I was asked by Jack Crawford to monitor Will's emotional well-being while he worked on cases,' Hannibal replies, lifting his dark eyes to rest on the crowd of observers. Alana sits beside Jack, who looks deeply uncomfortable beside Kade Prurnell. Hannibal hides a smirk and glances up at Steven. 'I was never officially his psychiatrist.'

An important distinction.

‘Well, if you weren’t his psychiatrist, what were you?’ Steven asks, leaning on the bench in front of Hannibal.

Hannibal turns his head and looks down at Will, but his Omega refuses to return the gesture, creating a tug of longing and grief in Hannibal’s chest.

‘I was meant to be his stability,’ he says softly. Sadly. ‘I failed him in that.’

‘How did you fail him?’ Steven asks, and Hannibal considers the question carefully. He has, after all, promised to tell the truth.

‘I was unable to determine if Will’s condition was due to mental illness, or from his work at the FBI.’ His words cut deep, and he sees Jack grit his teeth as he fights a flinch. Kade’s arms are crossed, her eyes flickering red with anger. Hannibal swallows, and speakers a little louder when he continues, ‘My mistake was never considering his innocence, until the murder of the bailiff from this courthouse.’

Lilian Vega looks up sharply, as does Jack and Kade. The victim’s identity have been kept from the press.

‘And how did you know about that, Dr Lecter?’ Steven asks, voicing all of their thoughts.

‘I’ve been asked to consult on the case by Jack Crawford,’ Hannibal explains. ‘He wanted a profile of the bailiff’s killer.’

Steven nods, one hand still in his trouser pocket, the other up to gesture as he pieces the story together for the court at large.

‘So you believe the bailiff’s murder was committed by the same person guilty of Will Graham’s alleged crimes, yes?’

Before Hannibal can reply, Ms Vega stands up to object.

‘Profiles aren’t evidence, they’re opinion. This is hearsay.’

Judge Davis considers, and then looks at Steven.

‘I will allow it,’ he says, and Brauer smirks at his opponent.

‘Thank you, Your Honor.’

‘I believe there are alarming similarities in the crimes, yes,’ Hannibal says.

‘Will Graham accused *you* of the crimes for which he now stands trial,’ Steven says. ‘And yet, here you are, testifying on his behalf for the defense.’

‘Will rightfully couldn’t accept these actions to be his,’ Hannibal replies, his expression softening as he stares at the blank, achingly sad face of his mate. Will is scared, and doing

everything in his power not to show it. Not to give in.

You're so strong, my love. Just a little longer, and you'll be free.

'A mind faced with the possibility of committing such deeds will find an alternative reality to believe in,' he adds, and Will finally, *finally*, looks up at him, the gold band thickening until it consumes the blue of his irises.

'You don't blame him for that?' Brauer asks, frowning in genuine bafflement. 'Even as his Alpha?'

'No.' Hannibal glances at him, and then returns his gaze to Will. To the only person that matters. When he speaks, he speaks only to him. 'Will Graham is, and will *always* be my mate.'

Fuck you, Will thinks, glaring through a haze of tears as Hannibal all but declares his love for him before a room full of strangers.

Steven nods, and steps back.

'Your witness,' he says, gesturing to Lilian Vega.

The prosecutor stands, sauntering closer as she speaks.

'Dr Lecter, what was the cause of death in the bailiff's murder?'

'A bullet. To the heart.'

Lilian hums, still advancing.

'And in Will Graham's victims, or "alleged victims", what was *their* cause of death?' she asks. Will's stomach clenches, and he feels himself retreating, seeking shelter inside his mind.

She knows we're lying, Hannibal… This isn't going to work…

Sensing Will's desperation, the fear leeching his strength despite the suppressants masking it from his nose, Hannibal has to fight back the urge to growl at the other Alpha.

'Mutilation,' he says shortly. Lilian nods.

'That's *very* different from a bullet,' she says.

'No two crimes of any killer are going to be exactly the same,' Hannibal replies, turning his head to watch her pace to stand where Steven was. 'The similarities –'

'Your Honor,' Lilian says, cutting him off in favor of addressing the judge. 'The witness's *personal* beliefs and *biases* are driving his conclusions. He's the accused *Alpha!* There's no way he can be impartial in this! There are clearly *two* different killers, and *two* different cases!'

‘Your Honor, there are sufficient similarities to consider this a defense,’ Steven says, standing to address the judge.

Judge Davis takes a moment, mulling over the information available to him, and then sits forwards.

‘I’m ruling this defense inadmissible, Mr Brauer.’

No…

Hannibal lowers his gaze, refusing to allow Ms Vega to see the flash of red in his irises as she smirks and dips her head to the judge.

‘Thank you, Your Honor,’ she murmurs, returning to her table.

‘All previous testimony on the matter will be stricken from the record,’ Judge Davis continues, and Hannibal looks down at his lap as Will’s hopelessness washes through him from their bond. He daren’t seek out his mate’s gaze, knowing that the Omega’s eyes will be pure gold, flicking from side to side as he tries to control his breathing. Hannibal can feel how tight Will’s chest is, how close to raw panic he is. After all, he cannot return to an unconsciousness defense, which means his case just got a lot worse… As far as the judge is concerned, he has now admitted to killing five people, and can no longer claim that he didn’t know what he was doing when he did it.

They’ll crucify him for it.

Heat flares in Hannibal’s chest, radiating out with each pulse of his heart. He feels strong, and light, renewed with purpose in the face of Will’s terror.

Don’t give up, mylimasis. I will save you. I made you a promise.

***

‘Bourbon Pecan Pie.’

Will glances up as Hannibal reveals the dessert with a flourish. He manages a small, wobbly smile, but misery chokes him, and he quickly ducks his head to hide the tears that splash onto the picnic blanket under him. The dream is different this time. They are on the edge of a river, beneath the branches of a towering oak tree. Birds sing in the still morning air, and, across the wide rushing water, the raven stag watches them.

Hannibal sets the pie down and drops his hand to Will’s, lacing their fingers together. He is wearing the same suit as he did in court, his tie the deep red of blood just before it leaves the body. Will shifts closer, folding himself into the crook of Hannibal’s elbow, his head against his Alpha’s shoulder. He shivers, feeling the chill of the dawn seep into his muscles.

‘I don’t know what to do,’ he whispers, staring at the stag. Watching the sunlight play in the oil-slick feathers of its neck, blending into pitch-black fur… At the strange lights sparkling in its obsidian eyes… ‘They’re going to execute me.’

‘No, they won’t,’ Hannibal murmurs, stroking up and down Will’s spine, massaging the tightness in his shoulders. ‘Everything’s going to be just fine.’

A dragonfly buzzes past them. Comes back, hovering nearby. An incessant sound, familiar…

Hannibal opens his eyes. He is in his bed, in his Baltimore townhouse, staring up at the ceiling and listening to the vibration of his cell phone on the nightstand.

Sighing, he rolls onto his side and reaches for it before it clicks to voicemail.

‘Hello, Jack.’

‘Hannibal, sorry to call you so early.’ Jack sounds exhausted. Did he also struggle to sleep after the Judge’s decision, yesterday? Hannibal sits up, swinging his bare legs out into the cool bedroom air.

‘It’s no problem,’ he says. ‘What can I do for you?’

Jack growls, trailing off into another exhausted sigh.

‘There’s been a murder,’ he explains. ‘We need you at the courthouse.’

Hannibal smiles, and feels a thrill run down his spine.

‘I’m on my way.’

***

‘So, it appears that the judge was murdered in his chambers, and then he was hauled out here to be put on display.’

Jack’s exhausted is well hidden from his team, and he speaks briskly as he brings Hannibal up to speed. Zeller is already searching the body for DNA evidence, blue-gloved hands moving over every inch of Judge Davis. Or, what remains of him.

The ageing Alpha is held up by chains looped through the rafters of the ceiling, a sword fixed in one hand, the other positioned to hold up the scales of justice. The top of his skull has been removed, as have his brain and heart, both organs placed on the scales for weighing. He still wears his robe, the dark material stiff with blood.

‘Not only is justice blind, it’s mindless and heartless,’ Hannibal says, dark eyes roving across the arrangement. ‘How did the killer get so close?’

‘No sign of a struggle,’ Beverly says, slipping a loose hair into an evidence bag. ‘Mutilation was post-mortem.’

‘He was shot in the chest, just like the bailiff,’ Zeller adds, pointing to the wound. ‘Can’t see the entry wound because he, er, removed the heart.’

‘But there is an exit wound,’ Price says, not to be outdone by his fellow Beta. ‘No slug. Must have taken it with him.’

Of course.

‘A trophy,’ Hannibal murmurs, and the forensic team pause to consider it. Jack touches Hannibal’s upper arm, dipping his head closer to get his attention and draw him away.

‘Doctor.’ They withdraw from the scene, and Jack lowers his voice still further. ‘With this judge’s death, there will be no verdict. No ending; it’ll start again, like the trial never happened. But *why?’*

Hannibal shrugs.

‘Psychopathic behavior is predominately goal-oriented,’ he says. ‘A means to a *very* particular end.’

Jack frowns, trying to understand it.

‘So… the killer wanted a *mistrial?’*

Hannibal glances over his shoulder and allows him a small smile.

‘It’s an elegant if, rather *unorthodox* solution.’

Jack huffs, and rolls his eyes.

‘He spares Will a guilty verdict, and his life… for the moment.’

‘Yes.’

I always keep my promises, Will.

Jack growls under his breath.

‘Question is; is it the same killer?’ When Hannibal glances down, Jack adds more bluntly, ‘Is Will still on trial, in your mind?’

Hannibal considers for a moment.

‘The use of a gun… Death first, mutilation last…’ He sighs. ‘I feel like St Peter ready to deny Will for the third time… I’m not sure this is the same killer, Jack.’

Before Jack can do more than heave a deep breath, the other Alpha notices Kade Prurnell striding towards them. She glances up from her phone as she nears the glass doors to the courtroom and her face drains of color when she sees the judge on display.

‘Excuse me,’ Jack mutters, hurrying out to intercept her. The blond Alpha turns away, covering her mouth as she fights the urge to vomit, and Jack speaks calmly and quietly as

Kade regains her composure. ‘The killer exerted careful control of the environment,’ he explains. ‘He left very little evidence behind.’

‘Jeez, Jack…’ Kade stares up at him, her eyes flooding red from the shock of it. ‘The trial was supposed to put an *end* to this. Instead, the circus has just added another ring!’

‘And we’re the clowns,’ Jack mutters, nodding his agreement. It’s clearly the wrong thing to say, though, because Kade’s sharp voice cuts him.

‘Who’s “we”, Jack?’ she demands, and Jack sighs again.

‘I got off-track.’

Kade purses her lips.

‘You have to force yourself out of this train of thought,’ she says. ‘The *trial* was going wrong before this murder.’ Seeing Jack roll his eyes, she speaks again before he can argue. ‘The trial was going *wrong* because you wanted to believe Will Graham.’ Kade searches Jack’s face. Searches his eyes, her own returning to steely blue. ‘Who *is* he to you that makes you wanna risk everything? You’re not his Alpha!’

‘A very cogent reminder of the pitfalls of having faith in one’s fellow man, thank you,’ Jack growls. Kade ignores him.

‘*Everyone*, at one point or another, has to leave somebody behind,’ she says, shaking her head. ‘You’ve gotta cut him loose. Otherwise, the someone being left behind, today… or tomorrow…’ She sighs. ‘Is gonna be *you*.’

***

He can’t sleep.

That night, after the lights have been turned low – not off, never off – Will covers his face with his arms and tries to block out the knowledge that Judge Davis has been killed… For him.

Tries to ignore the swoop of relief, of *glee*, that he feels knowing he’s not going to be found guilty.

Yet, he reminds himself. A mistrial is not a perfect win. It just means a reprieve.

The door at the end of the hall buzzes, obscenely loud in the silence. Will’s brow beads with sweat and a familiar, musky scent makes slick trickle between his ass cheeks.

Alpha…

He can hear hoofbeats… They’re getting closer. It’s not his heart, though some thud in time to the pulsing darkness in his chest. As he watches, Will sees his cell door swing open, squealing on rusted hinges.

I'm waiting for you…

He rises on silent feet. Approaches the door and steps out into the corridor… This is a dream, but it feels real…

The ebony stag turns its magnificent head, horns razor-tipped and reaching for the ceiling. It snorts, considering him with its clever obsidian eyes, the light catching them and turning them red, like rubies in the night.

I know you…

It walks away, heading out. Towards freedom. Towards the truth. Will begins to follow, forcing heavy limbs to move. He's hot, and his chest is tender again. He feels snakes writhing in his belly, a twinge of something deep within him, and the scent of his mom's pecan pie wafts on the breeze.

This way.

'Will.'

Hannibal's voice, sharp and clear. Will stops, and turns to look back at his Alpha. So handsome… The other man stands by his cell door, sandy hair combed back, dark suit complemented by the pale silk tie with the bloodstain pattern…

Fear is like ice water in his veins, and Will can't help but shiver. He doesn't want to… He can't…

Hannibal's dark eyes gleam with a strange maroon light, and he extends his hand, inviting Will to step back inside his prison.

You're not ready, mylimasis. But you will be. Soon. Be patient.

***

Visiting Will the next afternoon, Alana persuades Dr Chilton to allow her to visit Will in the privacy room, and sits across the table from him, her hands clasped several inches from his cuffed wrists.

'I was hoping the verdict would've helped focus your mind to get better,' she says quietly, eyeing him with pity when Will looks at her. 'Make what happened to you less terrifying and confusing.' She ducks her head. 'I can't exactly blame your lawyer.'

'Well, faith in any sort of *legal* justice has never been any more comforting than a *nightlight*,' Will replies, grimacing at the ceiling.

Alana frowns, concerned by the disdain in his voice. By the despair.

'There are so many miscarriages of justice when it comes to identifying a psychopath,' she says, trying to entice him to look into her eyes, so that she can *see* him. To see beyond his façade. 'You could *easily* have been misdiagnosed.'

‘I’ve already *been* misdiagnosed,’ Will replies, refusing to give her what she wants. What she is so *obviously* searching for.

‘Not by the court,’ Alana says, and Will nods, working his jaw.

‘No… Not yet.’ He pauses, chewing his tongue as he considers how best to explain it to her. ‘Walked out of that courtroom… And I could *hear* my blood… Like, er… A hollow drumming of wings…’ He wets his lips, not really seeing Alana anymore. Not really seeing *anything*, anymore. ‘And I had the… *absurd* feeling that whoever this killer is…’ He ducks his head, swallowing hard. ‘He walked out of that courtroom with me.’

He sees the sympathy in Alana’s eyes. But no understanding. No belief.

Not like Hannibal.

‘He’s gonna reach out to me,’ he murmurs.

‘What does he *want?’* Alana asks, frowning and tilting her head. Will glances up, smiling bitterly, and sniffs a laugh.

‘He wants to *know* me.’ He stares at her, reaching deep behind the pitying gaze and finding… Nothing. Fear catches his breath again, and he feels his eyes pulse gold. ‘What do *you* want?’

Alana is quiet for a long while, thinking carefully about her answer. About the man she thought she knew, and the man Will has become… About the darkness she sees in him, and the fear he inspires in her. About the vulnerability she sees, and the love Hannibal feels for Will.

‘I wanna save you,’ she whispers, her lower lip trembling.

Will’s heart stumbles at her words. Skips a beat and then begins to race, very fast, behind his ribs. He moves slowly, and carefully, his chain clattering as he reaches forwards and places a hand over hers. Alana’s breath falters, and he sees her throat bob as she gulps. Looks deep into her eyes, and lets the walls of his anger come down, brick by brick, showing her his fear, his hopelessness, and his desire for this all to be a really, really bad dream.

For him to be wrong about Hannibal. And Alana moves, she covers his hand with her own, holding him close, sharing warmth and strength.

You’re not alone, her touch says. *I still believe in you. You’re going to survive this.*

Will only wishes it was as comforting a thought as when Hannibal touches him. Because his Alpha would do anything for him. Anything at all…

The dream tickles the back of his mind. Something important, hidden in its depth… Gone before he can question it. Will sighs, savoring the feel of another person’s touch. Alana has always been able to comfort him, when he needed it. Helps him until he finds his own way.

His own strength.

And then, when I'm ready, Hannibal will save me.

Takiawase

Chapter Summary

In a bid to recover more memories, Will agrees to undergo intense nuchal-stimulation by Dr Chilton, which triggers him to recall the fact that Hannibal was strategically inducing his prodromes, and rapidly detoxing him from heat suppressants, causing the intracranial pressure.

Meanwhile, inspired by the BSU's search for an acupuncturist lobotomizing her patients, Beverly finds a hidden clue in the body of the Muralist, James Gray, leading to a devastating outcome.

Chapter Notes

Hey peeps, SORRY this took so long to write! I've been working on my other Hannigram story AND my own book, the first chapter of which is going to be released as a free audio book soon on my wife's YouTube channel, so many editings have been happening!!!

Anywho, I hope you enjoy, and know that I am already hard at work on Chapter 5. xxx

FOUR

Takiawase

'Wrap the leader around the tippet… Four, five… six times… Tuck the end between the lines, tighten and… trim.' Will puts his little scissors back into the pouch at his waist, and holds out the line so his daughter can see. 'It's called a blood knot.'

They are standing in the middle of the river, the current buffeting their knees. It's early, and, as always, birds whistle in the gold light of dawn. He feels peaceful, and *happy.*

Abigail smiles, hooking a strand of hair behind her ear as she leans in for a closer look. Will creates slack in the line, preparing it for the Beta to take as he continues,

'Your father taught you how to hunt. I'm gonna teach you how to fish.'

'Same thing, isn't it?' Abigail teases, shrugging at him. 'One you stalk, the other you lure?'

Will grins, and tips his head in acknowledgement.

‘One you catch, the other you shoot.’

Abigail smiles, her blue eyes sparkling. She looks very small in her beige fishing jacket and waders, a plaid shirt underneath to keep her warm. They are Will’s, from when he was a teenager, and Abigail is about the right size, but the hand-me-downs had been bulky on the slim Omega, too.

Is that how I looked, when my father taught me? No wonder he was so protective.

‘What are you trying to catch?’ Abigail asks, drawing his attention again. Will swallows, his smile fading. His gaze lingers on the far riverbank. It’s empty, for now, but he’s waiting for the raven stag to return. To watch them, with its clever obsidian eyes and silky fur…

‘The one who caught you,’ he murmurs, and Abigail sighs.

‘The one that got away.’

Will hums as he considers this, sharp eyes picking out the swirl of the current as the wind changes. It’s time.

‘If you catch a fish once and it gets away, it’s a *lot* harder to catch again,’ he says, stepping closer and passing the fishing rod to Abigail. Her hands are cool under his burning palms, but she takes it with confidence. She doesn’t drop it, like Hannibal did in last night’s dream…

Abigail catches his eye, knowing exactly what he’s thinking, and they both chuckle. Will’s chest tightens, and his heart skips a beat.

I can protect her when she’s here. I can keep her safe.

Abigail pauses, chewing at her lower lip, and she glances up at Will from beneath a furrowed brow.

‘Everybody thinks you’re lying,’ she says. ‘About the one that got away...’

Will nods, and shrugs. He’s aware of what they think of him.

‘That’s why I have to catch him,’ he replies, and they grin again, blue eyes dancing with the thrill of the hunt. Of the chase.

Shadows purring at the idea of killing again.

Born in blood.

‘Last thing, before casting a line,’ Will says, moving behind her, careful where he places his feet on the slippery rocks beneath him. ‘Name the bait on your hook after somebody you cherished.’

He backs away, leaving her alone in the current, a few paces to the side so that she can cast freely.

‘To say goodbye?’ Abigail asks, looking back at him. Will grins and shrugs.

‘Well, if the person you name it after cherished *you*, as the superstition goes, you will catch the fish.’

‘Huh…’ Abigail grins, and bats her eyelashes at him, teasing him. ‘And what did *you* name it?’

Pain flares, sharp and bright, and his throat tightens with a hot lump. Will wets his lips and swallows, steadying his voice before he tries to speak. Before he tries to put this feeling of loss, of *guilt,* into words.

‘… Abigail.’

Somewhere in the distance, in the real world, a door buzzes. Will catches the scent of an Alpha; muted and gentle, carrying with it the sweetness of an Omega mate. Tasteful perfume, nothing too heavy, shampoo and leather… And death.

Beverly Katz always smells like death.

Will opens his eyes, returning from his fishing scene before the Alpha reaches his door. He stands perfectly still in the center of the cell, not tense but ready.

Waiting.

She’s here about the Muralist. About the deranged Alpha responsible for stealing and murdering almost fifty Omegas, and sewing them together in an old corn silo. Skipping past the small talk, she holds out photographs of the mural, nodding to them as Will stares at the grotesque arrangement.

‘You were right,’ she says, hands on hips. ‘Killer was in the mural, just where you said he’d be.’

Will flips through the photos. The first is an aerial shot of the display, taken from the vent in the roof. Then a close-up of the Alpha, with his hand glued to his face, curled in the middle of the bodies, as though resting peacefully.

‘His name was James Gray,’ Beverly continues. ‘We found his vehicle outside the farm. Enough DNA on the bed of his truck for us to be confident he’s the Muralist.’

Convenient, Will thinks, huffing.

‘You found as much evidence on him as you did on *me*.’

Beverly rolls her eyes and then her shoulders, trying to shake off the tension pouring from the Omega.

‘I’m glad *you* said it.’

Will blows out his breath and turns squarely to face her.

‘Who stitched him into the mural?’ he asks, but Beverly just shrugs and shakes her head.

‘We don’t know,’ she replies, her voice tinged with frustration. ‘He may have had a partner… Another killer… Maybe they had a *suicide* pact…’

‘No, there was no *partner*,’ Will scoffs, taking a step closer to the bars. ‘This artist worked *alone* until he was stitched into his own creation.’

‘No signs of a struggle,’ Beverly says, frowning.

‘No,’ Will agrees, lifting his chin. He *needs* her to really listen to him. To *hear* him. ‘So, this second killer, whoever he is, understood the Muralist well enough not just to find his *canvas* but well enough to *convince* him to be part of it.’

He can see Beverly’s curiosity rising, like a dog scenting a trail. She leans closer, her eyes ringed with crimson.

‘You have an idea who that might be?’ she asks, tilting her head.

‘I do,’ Will replies, short and sweet, and Beverly realizes. The light dims and she growls, rolling her eyes again.

‘*Don’t* say Hannibal Lecter.’

‘I’m saying Hannibal Lecter,’ Will says, coming right up to the cell door. Beverly snarls at him, her eyes flooding completely red.

‘Didn’t you *stop* ringing that bell?’

Will growls back, long and low, enough to shock the Alpha in silence.

‘I’m not *asking* you to believe anything you can’t *prove*,’ he says. ‘I’m just *asking* you to prove it.’

‘Hannibal Lecter has no *reason* –’

‘That is *exactly* right!’ Will cries, choking on the sudden tightness in his throat and shaking his head at the flare of pain in his crest. Heat sizzles down his spine, settling like molten fire in his belly, and he feels the itch of his eyes as they flare gold. ‘He has *no* discernible reason, other than his own *amusement* and *curiosity!’*

‘That’s hard to prove,’ Beverly points out, hugging her arms tight across her chest. Will’s scent is thick with emotion; bitter pain and salty fear, smoky anger and sweet desire… He’s a hurricane of conflicting emotions, battered from the inside out by his ordeal. She’s reminded of Saul, her own Omega, and that one time he’d decided to “prove his independence” by living alone for almost six weeks. On the fortieth night, he’d called her in tears and begged

her to come get him, to take him home and never let him leave. And that had been a disagreement over a *house*, not allegations of murder.

'There will be a *very* clever detail to find on James Gray,' Will says, regaining some of his composure. His voice only trembles slightly; if she didn't know him so well, she'd have missed it. 'He wouldn't be able to resist it. Probably something that was overlooked. Something hidden.'

Beverly looks away, worrying at her lower lip as she weighs her options. Will's obsession with his Alpha's guilt is concerning, but at the same time, if it's a manifestation of the truth, and there *is* another killer out there…

She sighs, and looks back at him.

'I'll look for clever details,' she says. 'But I'm *not* looking for Hannibal.'

Will nods, and manages a small, tight smile. He hadn't really expected anything else.

'Just as long as you're looking,' he replies. Nods again, even as he starts to withdraw, his body going oddly still as his mind retreats into the depths. He takes a deep breath, releasing it slowly. 'You look out there… I'll look in here.'

I'll do whatever it takes to find the truth.

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Across the city, at the same time as Beverly and Will discuss the Muralist, a honey bee returns from collecting pollen. Guided by familiar scent trails and visual markers, she makes her way back to the hive, the sound of her wings just one of many as she crawls inside the nest to deposit her load.

Wax chambers fill the pearly white dome of a skull, filled with wriggling larvae as the next generation of bees develop. As the worker shakes herself, helped by others to shed the tribute, there is a distant voice; a dog walker coming closer, asking if the man propped up between the branches of the tree is okay. If he's been there all weekend…

And then, just as the bee checks her wings to fly again, the peace of the early morning is shattered by a scream, high and loud.

Birds explode from the trees and the hive, sensing a threat, swarm to protect the queen. The guards rise, a dark cloud in the cool air, spilling from the empty eye sockets and broken nostrils of the dead man, whose half-empty head they have made their home.

In less than three hours, the bees will be moved, so that the body of a dead man missing his brain can be taken by the Forensic Investigation Unit of the FBI.

Until then, the worker bee has a job to do.

***

Beverly had visited him before breakfast. Now, after a lukewarm shower and a few mouthfuls of grey porridge and the apple Matthew managed to sneak him, Will asks to see Dr Chilton. He's given a ten o'clock appointment, and taken to the dunking tanks in the visitor's room.

At 12.15pm, he returns from fishing with Abigail to see the Chief of Staff unfold a metal chair and sit before him.

Will speaks before the Alpha can give a fake apology for being late.

'I'll give you the same deal I gave Beverly Katz.'

Frederick tilt his head, leaning heavily on his silver walking cane, feigning innocent curiosity, and Will snorts.

'Oh, you *know* what it is,' he says, sneering at the Alpha. 'You've been recording our conversations. Or…' He leans forward, dropping his voice and allowing a faint blush to color his cheek as he pushes gold into his eyes. 'Are we pretending you didn't?'

Chilton narrows his eyes, his own color rising at the effect the Omega has on him.

'What "this" are you offering in exchange for my "that"?' he asks, and Will lifts one shoulder in a demure shrug, tipping his head *just* enough for the Alpha to see the curve of his creamy throat, and the pulse beating there.

'I'm *quite* the topic of conversation in psychiatric circles,' he murmurs, before looking over at Chilton from beneath his lashes.

Dr Chilton chuckles, and pushes himself to his feet.

'I shared my diagnosis of you on the witness stand,' he replies, limping closer. 'Your *personality* disorders, Omegan *empathy* skills… all forgeries.'

'Even if that were true, I'd still be a psychopath of *some* interest,' Will says. He imagines Hannibal's lips sucking on his crest, Hannibal's teeth sinking into the swollen, tender flesh, and he sees Dr Chilton's nostrils flare and his eyes flash red as sugary slick seeps into his boxers, the scent strong in the air between them.

'Hmm… Quite a *manipulative* one at that,' Frederick says, lifting his nose up and away from the Omega as he circles the cage. 'Poor, confused, *wounded* bird for Agent Crawford and Doctors Lecter and Bloom…' Around the back now, and Will makes a point of looking down, baring just a *hint* of his crest as he exposes the nape of his neck. It makes him feel physically sick, but he'll do what he must.

'But for *me*, well…' Chilton snorts. 'I get the psychopath's triumvirate. *Charm*, focus and ruthlessness.' A shrug. 'The charm being debatable, of course.'

Will scoffs, moving just enough that his scent flows out into the room, and he can show off his delicate jaw and soft lips.

‘So, either I’m a psychopath, *or* I am delusional.’ He looks down, producing a soft, *barely* audible whine for good measure. ‘Or, I’m *right* about Hannibal Lecter…’ Looks up, right into Chilton’s face, gold eyes meeting burgundy. ‘Aren’t you *curious* which one it is?’

Chilton hesitates, taking two long, deep breaths, sucking in Will’s scent and feeling a purr rattle his chest. His eyes flare crimson and he’s surprised by how low his voice is when he speaks.

‘Will you allow me to test you?’

‘Test me?’ Will says, baring his teeth in a smile. ‘I’ll take ‘em *all*.’

‘And a psychical examination?’ Frederick adds quickly, watching the gold swirl in Will’s eyes. ‘Everything?’

‘*Anything*,’ Will purrs, hearing Frederick’s breath catch. ‘You will be the first and *last* word in the mind and body of Will Graham. *God*...’ He swallows bile, clenching his teeth and shaking his head as his skin crawls. ‘You could dine out on *that* for *years*.’

Dr Chilton steps closer, looking down at him and now openly inhaling Will’s sweet Omega musk.

‘What about Dr Lecter?’ he asks, his gut twisting at the idea of his fellow Alpha’s rage if he were to visit and find his scent all over Will. *Inside* Will…

Will hums, tilting his head in submission, his eyes wide, a classic position designed to placate an Alpha. Or entice him.

‘Shouldn’t you be the *one* and *only* Alpha looking after me, Dr Chilton?’

‘Ideally,’ Fredrick replies, feigning nonchalance. It fails, however, when Will suddenly leans forward, and drapes his arms through the bars of his cage. Chilton jumps back a step, clutching at his tie as though desperate to protect his throat.

‘Well, then,’ Will croons, hiding his disdain at the way the Alpha *flinches* from him in fear. ‘As to your “that” for my “this”…’ His upper lip curls back from his teeth, and he growls softly. ‘*Do not* discuss me *or* my therapy with Hannibal Lecter.’

‘He’s your Alpha,’ Frederick reminds him, his eyes sharp with interest. ‘He has a legal right to know.’

Will shrugs.

‘Tell him that you’ve decided I can no longer be any of his business,’ he replies. ‘For my recovery.’

At Frederick’s hesitation, he purrs again, dragging it out until he sees the Alpha lean longingly towards the bars, eyes pure red and lips parted to taste him. He looks up with heavy-lidded gold eyes and adds, in his silkiest, most seductive voice,

‘I am now under your *exclusive* care.’

***

Cancer has a very particular odor, Hannibal notes, welcoming Bella Crawford into his office on Monday afternoon. However, despite the pain she clearly suffers, and the weakness dragging at her very bones, the dying Omega holds herself with regal grace and poise, and Hannibal finds himself enthralled by her calm demeanor.

He has brought a book of paintings from home, a first edition study of Rembrandts from his mother’s collection that he managed to recover after the war, and the detail is exquisite.

Looking down at it, Bella sniffs a bitter laugh.

‘Lazarus had it good,’ she murmurs, hugging her cashmere cardigan tighter about herself as she fights a shiver. ‘*My* social circle doesn’t include a friend with power over death.’

Smiling, Hannibal returns his gaze to the oil painting. He remembers the original hanging in his father’s study, though the recollection is deliberately vague. He has allowed those memories to fade, so as not to risk stumbling onto things best left forgotten.

‘I suppose I should’ve embraced Facebook while I had the chance,’ Bella continues, and they both chuckle at such a hideous notion. Their mirth is quickly silenced, however, when Bella runs a hand through her curls and pulls out a lock of loose hair. Another reminder.

Hannibal glances away, giving her privacy, and Bella sighs. She turns, rewrapping her cardigan about herself as she makes her way to Will’s armchair.

‘I never should have let Jack talk me into taking chemo,’ she sighs, and Hannibal buys himself time by carefully closing the book as Bella sinks into the seat, exhausted just from that small movement.

‘He’s trying to extend your life,’ he murmurs, but the Omega growls.

‘He’s trying to extend a quality of life that’s not *worth* the *effort*.’

Hannibal takes his seat, and crosses one long leg over the other.

‘Jack’s effort, or yours?’

Bella pauses, wondering how honest to be. At Hannibal’s open expression, she sighs.

‘I’m… vomiting my stomach lining,’ she admits, nodding and swallowing the tightness in her ravaged throat as she fights tears. ‘On a good day, I sleep… fifteen to eighteen hours… On a bad day, I don’t sleep.’ A shake of the head, anger sharpening her voice. ‘My best-case scenario is prolonged pain management.’

‘Jack will help you manage,’ Hannibal replies, watching her exquisite suffering. *Only through pain is the truth of a person revealed.* ‘He loves you, Bella.’ Bella’s eyes burn gold,

wet with unshed tears, and her gaze falters. ‘When you’re gone,’ Hannibal continues, ‘He will feel your silence like a draught.’

‘My silence is inevitable,’ Bella says. Hopeless. Beyond grief. Her eyes are empty pits of despair. ‘The war is over. The cancer is an occupying *force*. I want to *surrender*, while I still have my dignity.’

The power of her words, the *control* she still maintains, in spite of everything, touches something in Hannibal, and he purrs, just once; a low sound of understanding.

‘You are considering ending your life.’ A statement. Not really a question, though Bella confirms as though it is.

‘Suicide seems like a *valid* solution to my problem.’ She stares at him as though daring him to argue. Hannibal tilts his head, instead, and asks,

‘How does that make you feel?’

And Bella, her eyes lighting up with realization, smiles at him.

‘Alive.’ Seeing Hannibal grin, she lifts her chin. ‘How does it make *you* feel?’

‘I’ve always found the idea of death comforting,’ Hannibal replies. There is no ploy here, just simple honesty. He hopes, one day, to share such honesty with Will. ‘The idea that my life could end at any moment *frees* me to fully appreciate the beauty and art…’ A pause. ‘… And horror of everything this world has to offer.’

To be completely in the moment.

‘A death benefit,’ Bella whispers, nodding. She understands… A rare gift.

‘Upon taking his own life, Socrates offered a rooster to the god of healing, Asclepius,’ Hannibal says. ‘To pay his debt.’

‘What debt might that be?’ Bella asks, concern sharpening her gaze again. As though worried Hannibal might try to talk her out of it. But she has no idea who he is. And what he believes.

‘To Socrates, death was not a defeat,’ he murmurs, staring deep into her eyes. ‘But a cure.’

Are you going to cure yourself, Bella? Or continue to suffer, for Jack?

***

With Bella at a therapy session with Dr Lecter, Jack is safe to leave the office for an hour to visit the newest addition to his board of unsolved murders. When he arrives in the nature reserve meadow, he finds his forensic investigators clad in white beekeeping suits with ‘FBI’ stamped on the backs in transferable letters.

‘Gentlemen,’ he calls, drawing their attention from the beehive in the middle of being deconstructed. ‘Local police were supposed to exterminate the bees, so we could work the

crime scene. Apparently, someone shut that down.'

'I did.' Jimmy Price removes his mask and raises a gloved hand in the air, just as Zeller points over to him with a,

'He did.'

Jack sighs.

'Jimmy?'

'Well, I *love* bees,' Jimmy says, moving around the tree so he doesn't have to shout. 'Did you know that the *drone* is nature's most *talented*, suicidal swordsman? When the drone mates with the queen, his ejaculation is *so* explosive, it's audible to the human ear.'

'Alright,' Zeller mutters, rolling his eyes and turning away. He doesn't get why Jimmy can't have *normal* hobbies, like football and monster trucks…

'How long has he been out here?' Jack asks, burgundy eyes on the dead man. Zeller turns and wrinkles his nose.

'Er, from de-comp, I'd estimate two weeks.'

'Which makes sense, with how much honey is being produced,' Jimmy adds, nodding at the hive. Jack's face twists in disgust.

'Do bees naturally hive in human carcasses like this?'

'No.' Jimmy shakes his head. 'The victim was purposely repurposed as a human apiary.'

'Purposely?' Jack raises an eyebrow at him, and the Beta nods, but it is Zeller who responds, busy inspecting the victim's head.

'*Somebody* removed the eyes and part of the brain to make room for the hive.'

Jack's second sigh is long and loud. The world is full of sick fucks.

***

After his appointment with Bella, Hannibal receives a call from Beverly Katz, inviting him to join her at Quantico. He agrees, and, when he arrives, follows her down to the BSU lab, where the smaller Alpha tugs open the chiller drawer containing James Gray, the Muralist.

'Zeller's out in the field, otherwise I'd ask him to help me with this,' she explains, sliding the body out towards them. 'You were a surgeon, right?'

'I was a surgeon and a doctor, yes,' Hannibal replies, his dark shadow rising and peering through the layers of Beverly's question. Innocent, for now, though her scent hints at tension. Another breath, and he catches stale urine, bleach and….

Will. She's been to see Will this morning. That's explains the tension, then.

'Have you found any evidence on the Muralist's friend?' he asks, moving around to peer down at the dead Alpha from the opposite side.

'That's what I need your help with,' Beverly says. 'Might not have been a friend. Might not have even been an acquaintance.' She nods down to the body. 'Whoever killed him, *understood* him.'

Hannibal's eyes gleam, and he offers her a knowing smile.

'So often you open your mouth and I hear Will Graham's words come out.'

Beverly blushes, but she grins back. She doesn't deny it, just shrugs. It's one of the many things Hannibal likes about her.

He respects her.

'I have an arrangement with Will,' Beverly says, meeting Hannibal's eye squarely. 'He's agreed to consult with me on cases if I keep investigating the murders he's accused of.'

Will…

Hannibal is careful not to swallow. Not to betray any emotion on his face. Pride… Concern… Frustration.

Love.

'I'm happy to hear that,' he replies, watching Beverly strive to keep her disbelief and confusion from her face, until he explains, 'Will needs a champion, now more than ever.'

'He has *you*, doesn't he?' the fellow Alpha challenges. At Hannibal's enquiring eyebrow, she scoffs. 'You think there's a chance he could be innocent, I know you do.'

Hannibal, pulling on blue surgical gloves, sighs.

'I believe there is a possibility.'

'I'm just relieved he's not saying the killer is *you*, anymore,' Beverly says, and Hannibal's darkness flicks its tongue, sensing the lie.

'At least not to *me,*' he says, glancing at her to challenge the falsehood. Beverly holds her ground, piquing his curiosity. 'Who does Will believe killed the Muralist?'

'Doesn't know,' she says. Another lie. Hannibal turns his attention to the dead Alpha, allowing Ms. Katz to dig herself a hole from which there is no escape as she continues, 'He thinks if James Gray's killer hid him in the mural, he may have hid something else.'

Oh, Will… What a clever boy you are…

Hannibal fights a purr, and settles for a brisk nod. His Omega is so very *good* at thinking like a murderer.

‘A signature.’ He takes the magnifying lens from the side table. ‘What kind of killer seeks to depict the unconscious, instinctual *striving* of his victim by sewing him into his own mural?’

‘It wasn’t just for appearances,’ Beverly murmurs, watching as Hannibal examines the stitching.

Hannibal straightens, and moves to the other side. Beverly pauses for a moment, an instinctive challenge of dominance, before she relents.

They all relent, eventually.

‘You have to get to the truth beneath the appearances,’ Hannibal says, inviting her to discover his secret. To *know* him, in the way that Will is beginning to. ‘Only by going deep beneath the skin will you understand the nature of this killer’s pathology.’

Are you ready to see?

***

For all his delays this morning, once Frederick has permission to give Will a physical examination and a nuchally-stimulated interview, his afternoon schedule becomes free remarkably quickly.

He summons Will to the medical room after a miserable ham sandwich and yoghurt for lunch, and Will prepares himself as best he can as two prison guards lead him by the elbows up to the top floor. The medical room has been cleaned and repainted, but the resonances of Dr Gideon’s attack on the night nurse still echo in the air, thick and sweet as rotten fruit, turning his stomach the moment he steps into the room.

Dr Chilton turns when Will enters, his eyes bright and teeth bared in an excited grin at the sight of his Omegan prisoner.

‘Good afternoon, Will.’

Will doesn’t reply. He doubts he could, even if he wanted to. Nerves clog his throat and his jaw is frozen tight, clenching his teeth together hard enough to grind the molars. He’s scared; he doesn’t *want* Chilton’s hands on him, gloved or not, but he needs the chance to recover the memories.

It’s worth it… Please… Please let it be worth it.

‘Bring him to the table, please,’ Dr Chilton instructs, pompous voice ringing out in the quiet room. ‘I’ll brace him, and then you can remove the cuffs.’

Brace him?

Will's golden eyes snap up as he is dragged towards the examination table, locking onto the crest brace in Chilton's vinyl-covered hands. He starts to shake, digging his heels into the floor in a futile, instinctive attempt to stop it from happening. As much as he knows Chilton fears him too much to examine him without a brace, the sight and smell of it, leather and metal in his nose, sends a helpless fear coursing through him and he can't stop himself from fighting.

Popping open the front of Will's jumpsuit, the guards help Chilton pull the material from his neck, and a meaty hand winds in his hair to push his head forwards as he starts to struggle.

'Easy, Will. It'll be *fine*,' Frederick croons, slipping the collar around the squirming Omega's neck. He slides the metal bars up and spins the screw, tightening the pressure until –

Fuck.

A curious paralysis comes over Will's body. He's perfectly aware, fully conscious, but he can't move his limbs. They feel heavy; sedated. He falls silent and still, waiting for an Alpha's commanding touch. One of the guards, a Beta, snaps his fingers in front of his face, making Will blink, even though he can't flinch back.

'Holy shit… Is he…? That's *awesome*.'

'Thank you, gentlemen,' Chilton says primly, nodding to the cuffs securing Will's limp hands. 'Remove those. You may wait outside.'

It is the other guard, an Alpha, that removes the cuffs, and Will feels his gloveless touch like acid on his skin. A tiny whimper catches in his throat, making him blush. Chilton hasn't completely silenced him, just robbed him of his autonomy. Chilton notices, and frowns down at the guard.

'You, take over,' he snaps, pointing to the Beta. 'I told you; gloves at *all* times!'

'Yes, sir.'

When the Beta guard removes the cuffs, Will feels his arms rest at his sides, only able to move his eyes as he watches the two guards leave the room. Chilton remains behind him, just out of his sightline, and he hears a rustle of paper.

'Now, Mr Graham, this is a *full* examination you've consented to,' the Alpha says. 'I dismissed the guards for your privacy, of course; it's just us.'

Perfect.

Will swallows, rolling his eyes back as far as he can to watch as Frederick lays paper towels onto the bed. His heart beats slowly and steadily, but he can still feel fear trickle like ice down his spine. Chilton moves back into view, leaning heavily on his walking cane as he moves. He sets it aside and comes to stand in front of Will. Standing, Will is an inch taller, and he glares into Chilton's burgundy eyes.

‘Let’s begin, shall we?’ Frederick grins, and finishes undoing Will’s jumpsuit. He pushes the coarse cotton from the Omega’s shoulders, guiding Will to lift his hands to remove the sleeves. ‘Sit down for me.’

Will sits back on the bed, watching helplessly and willing himself, with increasing desperation, not to cry, as Frederick removes his prison loafers and tugs the jumpsuit from his legs. *Fuck*. Maybe this was a mistake… He’s down to a thin t-shirt and boxers now…

‘The last time you were examined, your condition had only just stabilized,’ Chilton says, looking up into Will’s face as his greedy hands pluck at the waistband of his boxers. ‘This should give us a better indication of your health. Omegas are so fragile, after all. You need special care.’

Sickness swirls in his gut as the Alpha pulls his underwear away from his body, exposing his balls and soft cock to the cold air. Will can’t even shiver; just closes his eyes and keeps breathing, immobile until Frederick guides him to lift his arms to help remove his t-shirt. And then he’s naked, and utterly vulnerable to the Alpha alone in the room with him.

Hannibal…

No.

Anger flares and Will opens his eyes again. He will endure this, and he will *not* beg for Hannibal to help him. He will not beg for *anyone*.

‘Stand up again,’ Frederick says, reaching past Will to collect his clipboard and pen from the bed. ‘Good. Now, first things first; weight.’ He takes him by the hand and leads him to the scales. ‘Step up. That’s it. Hold still.’

The nib scratches over the paper as he notes Will’s weight.

‘Hm, three pounds heavier than before,’ he comments. Grins up at Will. ‘Perhaps prison food agrees with you, Mr Graham.’

Fuck you, you sanctimonious bastard, Will thinks, though his calm expression never changes.

Next, his temperature. Fortunately, Chilton adheres to current medical practices, and checks his ear, making a note on his sheet again, humming to himself.

‘Good to see there’s no residual fever.’ He winks. ‘Hannibal will be pleased to know I’m taking care of you for him.’

Will swallows again. Follows like a good little puppet as Chilton leads him back to the bed.

‘Now, Will, I want you to lie on your back for me. Arms at your sides.’

At the nudging hands, Will finds himself lying as instructed, his head propped up and staring at the tiled ceiling, the paper sticking to the sweat on his back as Chilton moves around the table.

‘Tell me if this hurts you,’ the Alpha says, kneading Will’s injured shoulder. Will grits his teeth, ignoring the twinge, and it isn’t until Frederick’s hands move wider over his chest, pushing against his pectorals, that he winces.

Frederick stills immediately, looking down with concern.

‘Does that hurt?’ he asks, pushing again. ‘Blink twice if it does.’

Will blinks twice, internally grimacing at the feeling of vinyl-covered palms over his tender nipples. Chilton frowns, removing his hands to make another note on his sheet. Will can’t see him for a few seconds, and then the Alpha returns, now stood by the side of the bed, hands coming up to prod and poke at his abdomen.

‘Does *that* hurt?’ he asks, looking into Will’s face. Will blinks once. No. It’s *uncomfortable*, but he wouldn’t consider the ache to be pain. Especially not after everything *else* he’s felt. Chilton hums. ‘Alright, Will, I want you to roll over for me. Tuck your knees up to your chest, head down.’

Here it comes…

Will wishes he could grit his teeth, but he can’t. Tears burn his eyes and his cheeks flush with embarrassment. He can’t do anything to stop it, though, and feels himself being moved and adjusted into the classic mating position; ass up, thighs spread, cock and balls hanging.

Utterly exposed.

‘Nearly done now, Mr Graham,’ Chilton says, attempting to soothe him as a broken whimper slips, uncontrollably, past Will’s lips. He strokes over the Omega’s quivering back and moves to the cabinet to collect a speculum, cotton bud and bottle of gel. ‘Now, I’m going to loosen your crest brace a fraction, and you can tell me what you’d prefer; lubricant or nuchal manipulation.’

Fuck…

Fear is like a knife between his ribs, and Will can barely find his breath as Chilton adjusts the squeezing metal. He’s panting now, huffing little sobs as he turns his head to glare at the Alpha with wet eyes.

‘Well?’ Chilton holds out the lube. ‘Which would you prefer? This, or my hand on your neck?’

Oh God… This is really happening… This…

Will closes his eyes, seeking the calm oblivion of the river. It’s more difficult with a neck brace, but he doesn’t have to be wholly present for this part…

He’s never had an internal examination before. He knows he *should* have, but it never seemed like an issue, since he’d been on heat suppressants for so long and has never had *any* intention of getting pregnant.

‘L-lubricant,’ he mutters, his breath whistling through his nose. He keeps his eyes closed so he doesn’t have to see the disappointment on Chilton’s face, and sighs as the Alpha adjusts the brace again, calming him.

That’s good. He can float… Just let it happen…

The gel is cold, and it’s uncomfortable having the plastic inserted into his body, but it doesn’t hurt too much. He’s vaguely aware of Frederick talking again, probably babbling some nonsense meant to calm him, even as he widens the handle to open Will’s passage. *That* stings, and there’s a stabbing ache as the swab is taken, but then it’s over, and he just feels slick and open and *violated* because it wasn’t *his* Alpha doing it.

Hannibal is going to kill you… Slowly.

‘Test results should be back from the lab in a few weeks,’ Chilton says, securing the swab inside a tube of clear solution and writing Will’s name and prison number on the label. ‘Now, just a blood sample. Sit up for me.’

He positions Will upright, legs dangling over the edge of the bed, and allows himself a brief moment to savor the sight of the Omega’s nakedness. Will doesn’t even notice the leer this time; he can feel the cold slickness of lubricant still sliding out of him, and he can’t even clench his muscles to squirm.

Chilton tightens a strap around his right bicep, tapping the vein in his elbow before fetching a syringe. Although his head can’t move, Will glances down to see the needle prick his skin, sliding inside him to spill blood, deep red, into the vial. It almost hisses as it jets from the pulsing vein, and he watches with a sense of detached curiosity as Frederick takes two samples.

If wonder if it tastes different, now that I’m mated? If I carry Hannibal inside my blood?

‘And… we’re done.’ Chilton presses gauze to the bead of blood in the crook of Will’s arm and releases the strap. ‘Again, two to three weeks for test results, but this is all just standard, of course.’ His eyes gleam as he turns back to Will, pulling off his gloves with a snap. ‘The *real* insights are going to come from your mind.’

Will’s eyes track him as Frederick approaches, locking onto him as the Alpha comes to stand right between Will’s bare knees. Chilton tilts his head, considering the crest brace, and then runs one finger through Will’s dark curls, careful not to touch his bare skin.

‘I must admit,’ he murmurs, listing ever closer. ‘I am *curious* as to what Hannibal sees in you…’ Another inch and their lips will be touching… ‘He’s never seemed one to be lured by a pretty face… What’s so *special* about you, hm?’

Caught between the river and reality, Will can feel Chilton’s breath on his face, but it could just as easily be the breeze rising off the water. He casts his line again, eyes on the ebony stag watching him from the riverbank.

You’re always here with me. Wherever I go.

Chilton steps back with a sigh, and rubs his hands together.

‘Well, let’s find out, shall we?’ He limps to the door and opens it, inviting the guards back inside. ‘Help Mr Graham back into his clothes,’ he says. ‘And then bring him downstairs. Keep the brace on.’

The guards enter, and the Alpha’s eyes flash red when he sees Will’s bare flesh and collared neck. He licks his lips, frowning when the Beta hands him a pair of gloves.

‘You know the rules,’ his companion hisses, jerking his chin in Chilton’s direction. ‘Can’t touch him with your bare skin. Not again.’

‘Nobody would know,’ the Alpha mutters, though he does, thankfully, pull the gloves over his hands before approaching Will.

Grappling with a particularly strong trout, Will plants his feet wide to steady himself in the strong current, lowering the tip of the road so as not to snap the line before he can reel in his catch.

Just a little more…

‘He’s fuckin’ *gorgeous*,’ the Alpha purrs, spreading a vinyl-covered hand over Will’s chest. ‘Look at those *eyes*…’

‘Must be an Alpha thing,’ the Beta says, tossing him Will’s boxers. ‘Here, since you’re so smitten.’

‘Fuck you, Dennis.’ The Alpha dips his head to get a better look at the swirling gold in Will’s irises, and then straightens out the cotton underwear. He slides them up Will’s legs and pauses at his thighs, licking his lips again when he sees Will’s cock hanging under a thatch of dark hair.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake, Jason!’ Dennis, the Beta, smacks him out of the way and rucks Will’s boxers up, pulling Will’s pliant body forwards so that he can pull them over his hips. Then he pushes him back and reaches for the t-shirt. ‘Fucking *Alphas*.’

‘How come we ain’t taking the brace off him?’ Jason asks, snatching the top from Dennis so that he can be the one to pull it over Will’s head and help him into it.

‘Boss said he’s conducting the whole interview in it,’ Dennis replies, dropping to a crouch so he can pull the jumpsuit back up Will’s calves. He snorts. ‘Seems stupid to me; he’s a fucking retard like this.’

‘He’s just obedient,’ the Alpha says, cupping Will’s cheek. ‘Aren’t you, handsome? You’d do anything we told you, right now.’

‘Yeah?’ Dennis’s eyes light up and he straightens, hooking a finger through the collar and pulling Will to his feet. The jumpsuit pools, forgotten, at Will’s ankles, and the Beta considers Will with new interest. ‘Stand on one foot.’

‘You gotta lift it,’ Jason murmurs, still kneading Will’s chest. The Beta huffs, and runs a hand down Will’s leg, pulling his ankle up until his weight rests on one foot.

The trout is proving stronger than he’d thought, and Will feels his balance shift as the pebbles underneath his left foot sink from under him. He corrects his weight, sweat beading on his forehead, and feels a painful twinge in the nape of his neck as his crest swells.

Hannibal…

On the riverbank, the ebony stag tosses its head, snorting a cloud of breath into the cold morning air. It paws the ground, razor-sharp antlers slicing as the air as it turns, searching for the threat.

Alpha…

‘That’s enough,’ Jason growls, his eyes flooding crimson at the whimper bubbling up from Will’s throat. He shoves at Dennis, making the Beta stumble, and holds the other side of Will’s face to steady him. ‘Stand normal. It’s okay.’

The breeze shifts, and the river with it. Will takes a step forward, finding even footing again, and returns his attention to the fish. The line is tight and quivering; one wrong move and it will snap.

‘Come on,’ the Alpha mutters, hurrying to finish dressing Will. ‘Let’s get him to Chilton.’

He eases Will’s arms through the sleeves of his jumpsuit and presses the poppers closed as Dennis puts Will’s sneakers back on, and then they each take an elbow and walk him down to the elevator. Dr Chilton is conducting the interview in one of the basement rooms, and it’s a rickety journey down five floors.

‘You ever seen an Omega before this?’ Dennis asks, peering around Will’s prone body to Jason. The Alpha shrugs, acutely aware of the erection tenting his trousers but watching the steady red light of the security camera in the corner of the elevator. If he could just *touch* Will…

‘Only on TV,’ he says. ‘They’re rare though, right?’

‘Gettin’ rarer,’ the Beta agrees. ‘Never seen a male one before him.’

‘Hardly none left,’ Jason murmurs, dipping his head towards Will’s jawline. ‘Lot of ‘em die in childbirth, if they can’t get cut open to get the baby.’

‘Seems like a flaw in biology to me,’ the Beta grumbles. ‘Why get pregnant if your ass can’t stretch enough to squirt the kid out?’

‘Most times it can, just more dangerous,’ Jason says, a low purr now rumbling in his chest. ‘Man, I *need* one o’ these for myself…’

‘Touch him and Chilton’ll kill you,’ Dennis warns. Jason growls, but he pulls himself back and settles for rubbing circles on Will’s covered arm. The Beta shakes his head, sneering at

him. ‘Fucking *Alphas*, man.’

Will is sure the line will break. He wades ever deeper into the river, until the water is right up to his waist and cold against his belly. Ignores the smell of oil and stale whiskey in his nose, the sweltering heat of New Orleans against his skin, but the ghost of an Alpha’s hand on his neck has him fighting the urge to scream.

‘Sssh, darlin’…’

The elevator jolts to a stop, wrenching him back to reality. Will blinks, releasing the contaminated fishing scene to focus on the present. The guards lead him down a dimly lit corridor and into a dingy looking room, where Dr Chilton and a nurse are waiting.

An interrogation chair stands before him, bolted to the floor and fully adjustable. The guards lead him to it and Will sits like a good little boy, wondering why Frederick feels the need to strap down his ankles and wrists when he’s braced.

Fucking coward.

‘That’ll be all,’ Chilton says sharply, frowning at the way the Alpha’s touch lingers on Will’s shoulder. He waits until the doors swing shut behind them before turning to his nurse. ‘Shall we?’

She nods, and begins setting up an IV drip. Will rolls his eyes to watch her, his hands wrapped around the ends of the armrests. Behind him, he feels pressure ease on his crest and suddenly he can talk, he can move his *head*, and he looks back to where Frederick stands behind him.

‘Before I start asking you questions, I need some confidence that you will be telling the truth when you answer,’ the Alpha says. He sets a form down in front of Will, his hands clasped over the handle of his cane before him.

‘What’s this?’ Will mumbles, barely able to look at Chilton. He can still feel the ache where the speculum was…

‘A consent form,’ Frederick replies. ‘Hannibal signed it the other week. He has agreed to you underdoing *any* treatment I deem appropriate. Which *means* he has agreed to a narco- and nuchalanalytic interview. You, me, a crest brace and our old friend, sodium amytal.’

The nurse slides a needle into the back of Will’s hand and he frowns down at it.

‘Little something to loosen my tongue?’

‘Something *lawfully* used in the evaluation of psychotic patients,’ Frederick replies. The nurse’s deft hands tape the butterfly IV to his skin and Will’s honey-gold eyes track the thin tube up to the bag suspended on the frame. He swallows.

‘What methods would you use to induce memory loss in an Omega, psychotic or otherwise?’

Frederick hums as he considers the question, nodding when the nurse shows him the dosage. He's sure it'll be fine.

'The protein synthesis that moves memories from short-term to long-term in Omegas *can* be interrupted with excessive estrogen and the proper crest stimulation,' he says, prowling closer to Will, who uses his newfound freedom to turn his head and watch his approach. Chilton smiles. 'But that requires tools, and skills, and a certain level of unorthodoxy.'

'Does Hannibal Lecter possess those *tools* and *skills?*' Will growls, and Frederick pauses.

'Dr Lecter *has* indicated to me that he is open to the unorthodox, when it comes to treating patients,' he admits, and Will snorts.

'Oh, I wonder how *that* subject came up,' he bites. 'Sharing stories of the unorthodox?'

Frederick smirks, and takes the form away.

'As you can see, your Alpha's signed everything for you,' he says, twisting the key on the crest brace to re-simulate the feeling of floating paralysis in Will's body.

Will gasps, white-knuckles loosening on the chair. He hears the rush of fluid through the IV and realizes that the nurse has injected the sodium amytal as well. It snakes through the tube, creeps under his skin and floods his body, just as Frederick squeezes the brace again to create compliance and calmness.

Oh, fuck…

Will's pupils explode, black swallowing gold, and the whole world shatters. He's breaking apart at the seams, his blood boiling, his skin melting.

Heat… I'm going into heat…

He's in Hannibal's office, two days after the dinner with Freddy Lounds… He's sweating, his sea-green shirt clinging to the base of his spine and crest throbbing.

Alpha… Alpha, please…

But Hannibal isn't comforting him. Isn't mounting him, fucking him, holding him… He's kneeling before him, sliding a needle into his body. The second it touches his bloodstream, Will's fever spikes and he begins to shake, leaking slick like tears and his ovaries cramping.

Estrogen… He's giving me estrogen…

'I want you to draw a clock for me,' Hannibal murmurs, red-ringed eyes on Will's flushed and sweating face.

A shiver in the air, and Will's in the room with Chilton again. The Alpha's voice is muffled; he's sat in front of him, reading from a checklist.

'Did Dr Lecter administer any drug therapies during your sessions together?'

Is this real? Is he gasping? Panting for breath?

The memory comes quickly, shoved to the forefront. Hannibal, sitting across from him in the study, the soft leather of a crest-brace in his hands… Hannibal rising, and fixing it around his throat, tightening the metal to the point of pain.

'The pressure on the crest floods your body with heat hormones,' his Alpha explains, swirling the bolt tighter and tighter, until Will *keens* for him to stop. To please, please stop… 'Like striking many piano keys at once…'

Tears run with sweat down his face, and Will flicks his eyes down to the notebook on the glass table beside him. There's a clock in the book, showing quarter past seven. Only it's wrong… It's broken. The lines and numbers are falling out of the circle, crashing towards the edge of the page…

What's happening to me? What are you doing to me?

'The pressure on the crest fills your body with heat hormones…' Hannibal's words again, echoing in his mind. In his memory. 'Like striking many piano keys at once…'

And Hannibal, his *Alpha*, sits down across from him, but he doesn't look right. His face… Oh God, his *face*... Eyes blur and shift. The nose drops… It's a nightmare…

Like a problem in my brain… Like swelling, caused by excess estrogen…

'The dissonance might foster a change in your mind,' Hannibal says, sounding very far away. But Will doesn't recognize him… His face… Who he is… What he's doing to him… Why is he *doing* this to him?

Alpha… Alpha, please… God, mount me; breed me… Take me, fuck me, fill me… But don't do this… Not this…

'… Is something wrong?'

'Will?'

Frederick's soft voice by his ear, and the loosening of the crest brace, pulls Will back to the present.

He shudders, making no effort to silence the whimpers that had triggered the Alpha's protective instinct, and turns his head to nuzzle his damp forehead against Frederick's arm. Dr Chilton squeezes his shoulder, frowning down at him.

'He… he was *inducing* the prodromes,' Will gasps, gripping tight to the armrests and wishing, absurdly, that he could curl up against Frederick's chest. *Frederick* of all people. 'He… he was *encouraging* them… The black-outs, the lost time… It was all prodrome…' He flicks his head, trying to shake off the truth of the betrayal. 'It was *strategic*... It was *planned*.'

‘You would only see such an extreme reaction if you were detoxing from heat suppressants at the same time,’ Frederick says, rubbing Will’s arm to calm him. ‘And even then, the smell would be noticeable to anyone around you.’

Hannibal… Generously dispensing heat suppressants… Not *heat* suppressants… The Alpha’s nose at his throat, a quiet purr in his ear…

‘I can’t wait to smell you properly.’

Will bares his teeth in a snarl.

‘Unless my heat suppressants were being swapped for *scent* suppressants.’

He feels Chilton still, and then the Alpha steps around him to stare down with a *very* worried expression.

‘That would suggest a *radically* unorthodox form of therapy,’ Frederick says, and Will swallows, tasting bile.

‘Yes. It would.’

***

That evening, between dinner and the end of visiting hours, Hannibal waits with growing impatience to be permitted past the foyer of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. To his surprise, it is not an Orderly that comes to greet him and take him to see his Omega, but Dr Chilton.

‘Dr Lecter,’ he calls, drawing Hannibal’s attention. Frederick limps down the stairs, breathing hard from the effort, and Hannibal notes the flare of red in his eyes. ‘I am *so* embarrassed,’ Frederick says. ‘You didn’t get my message?’

Hannibal regards him in silence. He received no message, and Frederick is not embarrassed. He is all but *preening*, and he reeks of Will’s scent. He has been physically close to Will today…

How close?

‘I cancelled your appointment with Will Graham,’ Frederick continues, reminding him of his Omega’s unmated surname, which Hannibal has yet to discuss changing with Will…

Hannibal’s darkness swarms before his eyes. It is only with a monumental strength that he represses the prickle of red in his irises, and swallows down the snarl rising in his chest.

‘Is everything alright?’ he asks sharply; a concerned Alpha, protective of his mate. Frederick, waiting on a step above him to give himself height and imagined dominance over the taller Alpha, inclines his head for Hannibal to follow him.

‘I can explain,’ he says. ‘Shall we?’

Hannibal narrows his eyes, following slowly and somewhat reluctantly. He had been expecting to turn left, into the main part of the hospital, but Frederick leads him up the stairs, towards the administration floor. Towards his office.

'Will is at a delicate point in his, er, therapy,' Frederick says, waiting until the door closes behind them, sealing Hannibal away from the section of the hospital housing Will. 'I don't want to *confuse* or *overwhelm* him anymore than he already is.'

'Confuse him?' Hannibal ignores the reference to overwhelming Will. 'Isn't your opinion he's an intelligent psychopath?'

'It was,' Frederick replies, now keeping pace with him. 'But my opinion is *evolving*.' Despite his confident tone, he keeps his eyes on the stairs as he explains, 'After administering a narco- and nuchalanalytic interview, therapeutically vital information has come to light.'

Clever, stubborn boy, Hannibal thinks, pride warring with frustration at Will's fortitude. To suffer the manipulation of his crest at the hands of another Alpha, *especially* an Alpha as incompetent as Dr Frederick Chilton… Will *must* be desperate to retrieve his memories.

'What sort of information?' he asks, curious at his own flicker of concern. *If anyone could be my undoing, it would be Will…*

'What Will Graham suffers from may *not* be a single condition, but a continuum of illnesses, all with different neurological mechanisms,' Frederick replies, coming to a stop at the corner of the stairs. If they continue, they will reach the floor with his office. As it stands, the lack of an invitation further is deafening. 'Some naturally occurring,' he adds, slanting a sly glance at Hannibal. 'Others appear to have been induced.'

'Induced?' Hannibal quirks an eyebrow, feigning innocent confusion. 'Induced by whom?'

Come on, Frederick. Challenge me to my face, if you dare. Will would.

'Did you ever use any kind of nuchal manipulation in your treatment? Or did you brace Will's crest at all as a sexual act?'

'Crest bracing and manipulation is common practice amongst mated pairs,' Hannibal replies, sounding puzzled. 'I bit him several times.'

Despite Frederick's blush, and the flash of red in his eyes at the reference to Hannibal and Will's intimacy, the smaller Alpha manages to keep his voice steady and somewhat smug as he says,

'Evidently, it was overloading his body with heat hormones and estrogen, creating fluctuating prodromal phases, intercranial pressure and advancing his heat… Almost *strategically*, it seems.'

Smirking at Hannibal, he continues up the stairs. Fleeing, one might call it. No doubt he considers himself to be leaving with the upper hand. Denial is a powerful tool.

‘You’re suggesting it was intentional?’ Hannibal calls, and Frederick cannot resist pausing and turning to look back at him.

‘All our conversations about psychic driving, you were *so* curious and eager to hear what I had to say, while saying very little yourself.’

‘I had very little to say,’ Hannibal says, coming closer. Frederick tilts his head a fraction, and cannot maintain eye contact with the more dominant Alpha.

‘I have been thinking about the possibility that *you* may have been psychic-driving Will Graham all along,’ he says, and his scent sharpens with fear at the challenge. Hannibal remains impassive, though he feels his shadow dance in his eyes.

‘A bold accusation, Frederick,’ he says lightly, and watches the other man shiver. But Frederick manages to lift his head, his eyes burning crimson, and replies,

‘You’re not the only psychiatrist accused of making a patient kill.’ At Hannibal’s continued silence, he adds, ‘We have to stick together.’

Smirking, he turns and continues his climb up the stairs. When he reaches the top, Hannibal calls to him one last time. A warning, and the only one he will give.

‘Frederick. Will is my Omega. I won’t be kept from him for long.’

***

‘Not hungry?’

Matthew’s soft voice filters through the bars above his head, and Will opens his eyes to look up at the wiry Alpha. He presses his lips together and shakes his head, not trusting himself to speak. The sodium amytal and crest manipulation has left him with a throbbing headache and crippling nausea. His mouth feels coated in a dry, sticky residue, and whenever he tries to get up, the room spins. He’s curled up on his side, the blanket over his back and head in a pathetic excuse for a nest, sweating in his prison jumpsuit but refusing to remove it. He needs as many layers as possible right now. Needs to hide himself from the world and be safe.

‘I’ll check on you again before lights out,’ Matthew says, collecting the untouched tray from the food slot. ‘Get some rest.’

Will is sliding the blanket over his face again before the Alpha has gone. His skin crawls, inside and out. He feels *dirty*. Very small and very alone.

This is our place…

Closing his eyes, he sinks into the darkness, reaching for the brass handle of the door to the imaginary bedroom he shares with Hannibal. His palm brushes across the metal, but he can’t turn it; the clatter of wheels down the corridor disturbs him, dragging him back to reality. He squeezes his eyelids shut, pressing his hands over his face to simulate Hannibal blinding him. The bedroom comes more easily now, and the door swings away from him on silent hinges.

Sheer white curtains billow at the open balcony doors, and, from the garden below, Will hears the sound of a child laughing and splashing water.

Mischa.

The bedroom is empty. The canopied bed stands in pride of place in the center of the pink marble floor, its cover rolled back to reveal the beauty of the painted ceiling. Cherubs and angels, blushing clouds caught in an eternal sunset and the deep, calming blue of Heaven's skies.

Will traces his fingertips over the dresser beside him, ignoring his reflection in the gilded mirror hanging on the wall above. The wood is dark, and carved into grapes and vines, set with brass handles. It is as elegant as Hannibal's furniture, but an antique unlike his Alpha's modern tastes. Hannibal is all sharp lines and smooth surfaces.

Will…

The whisper of his Alpha's voice has him turning to the door, half expecting to see Hannibal there. But it is empty. Hannibal isn't coming for him.

I don't want you here.

Will doesn't want to depend on him. He doesn't want to find him… Turning to the bed, he scowls down at the perfect white covers and plush cushions. Hannibal may be his Alpha, for now, but that *doesn't* mean Will is going to surrender to him.

He pulls the thick covers back and crawls into the very middle of the bed, snuggling down amidst their mingled scents. He can rest here, in *their* sanctuary, but he doesn't need Hannibal.

He doesn't need anyone.

***

After a fitful night spent waking every few minutes to check if Bella was still breathing, Jack is running on caffeine and Alka Seltzers the next morning, and his mood is less than tolerant when he goes down to the BSU lab to receive the update on the beehive victim.

'Duncan Halloran, 52, divorced, bankrupt,' Zeller says, gesturing to the half-desiccated corpse propped on the autopsy table. 'Reported missing six months ago.'

'And what do we know about his death?' Jack asks, exhaustion sharpening his voice.

'Considering any post-mortem morphological changes, this guy's white blood cell count was through the *roof* when he died.'

Jack's eyes flash red.

'You telling me his killer was a fever and/or a massive infection?'

‘Lock ‘em both up,’ Zeller quips, and Jack growls at him.

‘No family, no money, no reason to live. Alive, dead or dying, who put him under the tree?’

‘It’s *possible* we’re dealing with a highly motivated *religious* individual, here,’ Jimmy says, drawing Jack’s glare.

‘Explain.’

‘In Hinduism, honey is considered one of the five elixirs of immortality,’ the Beta says. ‘In Christianity, the bee is considered to be an emblem of Christ. His mildness and mercy on one side, his Old Testament justice on the other.’

‘Okay,’ Jack murmurs. Thankfully, he is saved further explanations by Zeller, who has joined Price around his side of the table and is shining a flashlight into the hollowed-out skull of the man.

‘The orbital bone, his sphenoid –’ At Jack’s blank expression, Zeller grimaces. Sometimes, he forgets the Head of Behavioral Sciences isn’t an actual scientist. ‘Um, behind where the eyeballs would usually be, there’s tiny punctures.’

He steps back as the Alpha switches on the magnifying light and leans in to examine it for himself. Speaks over his shoulder so Jack will know what they’re dealing with.

‘Something long and sharp was *pushed* in his brain.’ A beat but no recognition, so he adds, ‘Jack, this guy was *lobotomized.*’

And there it is. The look of dawning horror, and grim determination at what it means.

Somebody did this to him. Somebody they can catch.

***

‘I never realized how much of a sweet tooth you had,’ Hannibal says, holding out another spoonful of vanilla gelato for Will to take. ‘Even for an Omega.’

Will hums, closing his lips around the offering and licking the spoon clean. He holds the ice cream in his mouth for a moment, letting it melt, and then swallows. Slithers down Hannibal’s bare chest and, grinning at the desperate, warning growl from above, licks his cold tongue up the underside of his Alpha’s erection.

Hannibal huffs a gasp, which quickly turns into a groan when Will swallows him whole, enveloping him in chilled flesh. He sucks in a hissing breath when Will gulps, his slick throat tightening around his length, and Hannibal sets the tub aside in favor of holding Will’s head with both hands. He purrs his praise and encouragement, receiving a low, rumbling reply from Will, and rocks his hips up into the welcoming embrace, chasing the flash of heat building in the pit of his belly.

Gulping Hannibal’s cock past his gag reflex, Will feels hot slick ooze between his ass cheeks as his own desire flares, and he grinds his own erection against the soft sheets. His crest

swells, each ridge flushing deep red as heat floods his spine to radiate out with every throb of his heart.

He loses himself for a while in the motion of his head moving up and down, the slide of skin against lips and the salty, musky taste of his mate. Reaches up to play with Hannibal's balls, fondling the soft skin and tugging on the weight of them as Hannibal's lazy thrusts become sharper, more erratic.

'Will…'

Hannibal keeps his voice soft, but his hands are tightening. Will purrs again and buries his nose in the rough hair of his Alpha's groin, inhaling his thickening scent. His mouth waters, wetting his dry tongue, and he feels spit gather on the edge of his lips where he can't swallow it. Before he can reach up to wipe it away, Hannibal's hand is on his wrist, stilling him. Making him leave it.

Making Will drool over him as Hannibal fucks his mouth.

He is a picture of wanton lust. He moans his satisfaction at the idea of it, of being *used* for his Alpha's pleasure, and digs his fingers into Hannibal's hip as he swallows. Keeps swallowing, gulping down the offering.

He can *sense* the change as his Alpha nears orgasm. Hannibal's taste suddenly sharpens, and his balls grow hot and heavy in Will's palm. His scent overwhelms him, like a wave crashing in off the sea, and he feels the muscles of Hannibal's thighs and abdomen spasm, shoving up, up, *up*, as deep into Will's throat as he can go, and then he's spilling boiling seed into him, swelling with a knot that Will stretches his jaw to accommodate.

'*Fuck,* Will…' Hannibal's oath ends in another breathy laugh, and he tips his head back onto the pillows mounded behind him, staring sightlessly at the ceiling as he rides out the waves of gold pleasure that only his Omega's talented mouth can summon.

Without being inside his Omega's body, Hannibal's knot quickly deflates, and Will kisses each inch as he releases it from between his swollen lips. He wipes his chin and grins up at his Alpha, his eyes flashing gold when he sees the bright color on Hannibal's cheeks and the sheen of sweat on his forehead.

'Good?' he purrs, earning himself a moan and slanted grin from Hannibal. Two strong hands catch him under his armpits, hauling him up to straddle Hannibal's lap, and his yelp is swallowed by a bruising kiss.

Will smooths his hands over Hannibal's broad chest, sliding his fingers through the greying hair between Hannibal's dark nipples, moving his mouth in perfect synchronicity with his mate's. They crush, nip and suck, part for air and share spit-wet breath before meeting again, matching each other touch for touch. Hands roam freely, squeezing muscles and tracing scars, tickling down heaving ribs and carding through their hair to grip and pull, adding a zing of pain to the pleasure drowning them.

I will never leave you.

Will rocks his hips, smearing the oozing drops from his cock onto Hannibal's stomach and wetting his lap with the slick pouring from his ass. Hannibal's breath catches at the feel of it, at the tingle over his re-hardening length, and he kneads fingermarks into his Omega's firm buttocks, pulling them apart as he nudges his erection up against the burning ring just *waiting* to part for him…

'Breakfast!'

A clatter of metal on metal yanks Will from the dream, and he jerks upright on his narrow prison cot, chest heaving and jumpsuit clinging to him. He's sweating, blushing furiously as he realizes the dark cotton shows off *all* his wet patches, including his slick-soaked crotch. Blushes again when the surly Orderly holds out the tray of breakfast, clearly expecting him to stand up to collect it.

Fuck… Fuck, fuck!

He knows better than to keep the nurse waiting. Shuffling to the end of the bed, Will holds his blanket in front of him and reaches for the tray with his free hand, pulling it closer before setting it aside. He can't eat right now; even if he *didn't* feel full from the dream, shame has always had an interesting way of robbing him of his appetite.

Leaning forwards, he grinds the heels of his hands into his eyes, trying to block out the vision of Hannibal's smiling face, the *adoration* in his eyes as Will rode him, kissed him, touched him…

What the hell is wrong with me? I don't want this!

Stripping out of his jumpsuit, he sits, shivering, in his damp t-shirt and boxers, sipping at the bitter black coffee and wishing he could add just *one* sugar to it…

I never realized how much of a sweet tooth you had.

Will pinches the bridge of his nose, growling to himself as heat flares in his crest again. God… He's still so *hard*; aching and unsatisfied. He can taste Hannibal's seed and scent on his tongue, even coated in a layer of cheap coffee, and has the remembered feel of his Alpha's hands in his curls. The desire is so sharp within him, coiling like a snake inside his gut, that he's actually tempted to wank right here, in his cell, under the steady red light of Dr Chilton's security camera.

Wouldn't *that* be an interesting topic of conversation in his next therapy session with the good Chief of Staff?

Imagining himself explaining his juvenile sex dream to Dr Frederick Chilton cools his ardor somewhat, and Will makes it to the sink to splash tepid water over his face. Shields himself from the obtrusive camera as best he can and grits his teeth before giving his raging hard-on a sharp squeeze that has him staggering, dizzy with the pain of it.

Fuck… Just five more minutes of sleep would have sorted this…

Growling to himself at his own pathetic desperation for sexual contact with his murderous, manipulative Alpha, Will stomps back to his cot to eat his breakfast.

Maybe he should ask Chilton for some sedatives to ensure a deep and dreamless sleep.

***

It doesn't take long for the police report of a blinded man left to wander in the local park to flash up on Jack Crawford's radar, and Price and Zeller collect him from the ER for a thorough examination in the BSU lab.

'Multiple holes in this guy,' Zeller says, his voice rough with anger. He leans closer, shining his flashlight over the slack face of the zombie-like Beta before him, and he has to swallow the feeling of sand coating his tongue before he can continue, 'Over a dozen. Both eye sockets. The, er, lesions have severed most of the nerve tract to the frontal lobe…'

'He's covered in bee stings, like he got swarmed,' Price says, tiling his head as he watches from a safe distance behind Zeller. He's never been a doctor, after all. 'Must be *floating* in apitoxin. Probably doesn't feel a *thing*.'

'Not feeling anything has got nothin' to do with bee stings,' Zeller says, inviting him closer. He shakes his head, his own eyes burning. 'Welcome to the world of the living dead.'

'There's a pattern,' Jimmy says, glancing up from examining the Beta's swollen arm.

'Hey,' Beverly calls, pulling on her gloves as she enters the lab.

'*Hey*,' Jimmy croons, grinning at her. 'Look what the Katz dragged in.'

Beverly rolls her eyes at the pun and then frowns over the surprisingly *alive* man in her morgue.

'What are you looking at?'

'A *pattern*,' Jimmy and Zeller reply, frowning at each other in typical rivalry as they jostle to be the first to tell their boss the discovery. Zeller huffs, but he knows that Price has more knowledge about this. He is the chemical specialist, after all.

'See, some of the bee stings triggered an allergic reaction; others didn't,' Jimmy says, jotting down his findings on a clipboard. Zeller gets to work tracking the stings up and down the Beta's arms.

'The inflamed bee stings were all in line with the body's meridian,' he says, frowning as he peers more closely at the tracks. 'On acupuncture points.'

Intrigued, Beverly draws closer, watching Zeller switch on the magnifying camera, bringing up the punctures in high definition on the screen beside him.

'The bee stings are *hiding* the needle marks,' the Beta mutters, frowning at his finding.

Only by going deep beneath the skin will you understand the nature of this killer's pathology.

Beverly's heart jumps, and excitement makes her eyes prickle red.

'What did you say?'

Zeller hesitates when he sees her crimson irises, and wets his lips before replying.

'Er, the, er, the bee stings are hiding the needle marks?'

Oh my god…

Turning on her heel, Beverly hurries from the lab. She has to check the body of James Gray before it is sent for cremation.

Peering through the magnifying lens at the rough mural threads, she has to double check when she realizes what she's seeing.

'Stitches are hiding *stitches*…'

It doesn't take long to get him open, and Beverly slides a couple of fingers inside the dead Alpha. When she feels the gap, the unusual hollowness, she feels a shiver of cold fear run down her spine.

'He took his *kidney*.'

***

'I feel like I'm losing my mind…'

His voice sounds raspy, and Will remembers the scent glands in his throat being swollen to the size of grapes. It's late, and he's lying flat on his back, on his sweat-soaked prison cot. Will grips at his jumpsuit, trying to dig the crawling heat from under his skin. It's torture; like fire ants marching through his veins, boiling his brain in his skull.

This is what heat feels like… I was in heat…

'Just tell me… if *he's* real…'

He hears himself, begging Hannibal, his *Alpha*, for comfort and security… For *honesty*…

'I don't see anyone,' Hannibal had said, his voice echoing in Will's mind.

The cracks in his memory widen, spilling the truth faster and faster, like a flood of putrid water. Will shivers at his own remembered whine, at the sound of *need* only an Omega can make.

'*No*,' he'd moaned. 'He's *right* there…'

'There's no one there, Will.'

‘No, you’re *lying!’*

He had to be lying, he *had* to be, because otherwise… Because otherwise he was *crazy*… Will bares his teeth at the ceiling of his cell.

I’m not crazy. I never was.

‘We’re alone,’ Hannibal had insisted. ‘You came here alone. Do you remember coming here?’

Rolling onto his side, Will can *see* Hannibal’s dining room from between the bars of his cell door. He can see himself, sweating and shaking, eyes flaring gold and cheeks flushed pink, with Hannibal in front of him and *Abel Gideon* sat at the head of the table… In the chair that Hannibal had said was empty…

‘Please don’t lie to me!’

Will hears himself sobs, sees himself turn to his Alpha, his mate, screwing up his face at the pain in his head.

He remembers that. He’d felt like he was breaking apart.

‘Garrett Jacob Hobbs is *dead*,’ he hears Hannibal say, raising his voice to cut through Will’s panic. Will sees himself struggling to breathe now, and sees the blood drain from his face, leaving him deathly white under his dark, sweat-damp curls. ‘You killed him. You watched him die.’

It’s coming…

That feeling, that dawning sense of *heat* and *heaviness* as his mind broke apart… But it hadn’t felt right… It had *hurt* too much…

‘What’s *happening* to me?’

Will watches himself curls around his chest, pressing at his eyes, trying to dig them out because it hurts, it *hurts* so *fucking* much and if he can just, if he can just… If he can just *make it stop*…

‘Will… *Will*… You’re going into heat, I want you to hand me the gun!’ Hannibal barks. But Will had shuddered, his scent souring with pain, and Hannibal had *growled*, his eyes flashing red. ‘Will, I want you to hand me your… Will?’

Standing in his cell, Will watches through the door as Hannibal grabs the gun, just as his other self convulses. His Alpha pulls it from the other Will’s clenching fingers before he shoots either of them by accident. Sets it on the mantlepiece and then takes hold of the Omega by the front of his throat, holding his head up. He reaches around and slides his hand under the collar of Will’s jacket, massaging his crest.

Oh my God…

Embarrassment flares as Will remembers himself reacting to the nuchal manipulation. Sees his eyes roll back, and watches himself falls into Hannibal's arms as pleasure rips through him, grabbing on tight as he rocks against his Alpha's body.

And Hannibal had given Gideon a warning look when he'd heard the other Alpha shift, reacting to the smell of seed as Will came hard, before pushing his mate back to stand by himself, holding him under the chin so he wouldn't fall.

'*That's* it,' Hannibal had whispered, checking Will's temperature. In his cell, Will swallows and flares his nostrils, smelling the scent of sugary slick flowing again. He doesn't smell like burned caramel anymore.

'Hannibal…'

His gut clenches at the soft sound he'd made… The plaintive *mewl*… Watches as Hannibal gives the other Will's crest a final pinch, leaning in and kissing his ear.

'*Stay*,' the Alpha whispers, and Will had nodded.

Will frowns, tracking Hannibal with his eyes alone as he retrieves the gun from the mantlepiece, inspecting it and its clip full of bullets, before wandering towards the head of the table.

'His heat triggered a mild seizure,' the Alpha says calmly.

'That… doesn't seem to bother you,' Gideon replies, eyes flicking from the twitching, heat-drugged Omega to the Alpha.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow.

'I said it was mild.'

Anger flares in Will's chest, and his lips twitch in a furious snarl. He pushes open his cell door and enters the scene, inspecting it from the side. Watches himself, twitching and panting, his erection tenting his trousers and sweat trickling like tears down his face. Turns his attention to Hannibal, who places the gun on the table next to him, sits down and clasps his hands before him, his burgundy eyes locked on the other Alpha.

'Are you the man who *claimed* to be the Chesapeake Ripper?' he asks, ignoring the tiny sounds of need coming from Will.

'Why do you say "claimed"?' Gideon asks, frowning in confusion.

Hannibal narrows his eyes.

'Because you're not,' he replies. 'You know you're not, and you don't know much more about who you are beyond that.'

'Are *you* the Ripper?' Gideon asks, and Hannibal's eyes gleam. He turns to Will, his expression filled with… what? Regret? Love…? Pity? When he speaks, something in his tone

makes Will feel sick. Makes him feel split open and hollowed out.

‘A terrible thing… To have your identity taken from you.’

You did this to me… You broke me… Why?

***

‘Whoever killed James Gray didn’t just take his leg.’

Meeting Beverly Katz in the privacy room the next morning, Will blinks several times and tries to concentrate through his muzzy headache. Lying in the semi-darkness of his cell after reliving the night with Hannibal and Gideon, with only the distant screams of psychotic Alphas to keep him company, it had taken him a long time to get back to sleep. Now, he feels his body aching protest as he forces sandy eyes to focus on the new photographs of the autopsied Alpha.

‘*Sutures* hidden beneath the stitching that wove him into the mural,’ Beverly continues, leaning over towards him and pointing to the image. ‘One crime made to look like another.’

‘Like the Copycat…’ Will says, palms pressed together before him, sweating against each other. When he places them to the table, the cold metal is a shock against his skin. ‘… *And* the Chesapeake Ripper.’

I understand.

It’s so clear, now. His design… His *mate’s* design… The *Ripper’s* design… How could he have been so *blind?*

Beverly growls a warning, and sits down opposite him.

‘Now you’re saying Hannibal Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper?’ she retorts, disdain curling her lips back from sharp teeth.

‘I’m saying *also* the Chesapeake Ripper,’ Will whispers, tears burning his eyes.

How did I not seen it? How could I not have known?

He feels *dirty*. Like something crawled inside him and poisoned him… Poisoned his own darkness, so that it swarmed him. Filled him…

I let him fuck me bare… I let him bite me. Bond me. Make me his.

‘Um…’ He swallows bile, his chains rattling with the force of his trembles. ‘Were the kidneys *surgically* removed?’

‘Yes,’ Beverly replies, nodding once. Will purses his lips, fighting nausea.

‘Dr Lecter was a surgeon.’

‘I know he was,’ Beverly says, expression hard. ‘I asked him to consult on James Gray’s autopsy.’

Panic snatches Will’s breath, crushes his heart and draws a strangled whimper from his throat before he can stop himself. He feels his eyes flood gold, itching with the intensity of the color, and stares, horrified, at Beverly.

‘You *what?’*

No… no, Beverly, no…. Hannibal, please…

‘If you invited him with an actual *agenda*, Hannibal would *know* it,’ he gasps, but Beverly huffs at him.

‘He *pointed* me to the evidence!’ she protested, and Will growls at her. At her *naivety.*

‘He pointed you to an *absence* of evidence!’

God, he can barely breathe… He can’t… He’s dizzy… This is bad, so very, *very* bad…

Please, please, Alpha… Please don’t hurt her…

‘He’s *baiting* a *hook*, Beverly! He’s *toying* with you!’ His voice breaks, and he has to take a slow, shaking breath before he can continue, ‘Go to Jack. Tell him everything.’

Beverly shakes her head.

‘I can’t bring this to Jack until I can back it up.’

Please… please…

Will lowers his head, holding his hands palm up in supplication, his sweet Omega musk sharpening with salty fear. He whimpers, feeling tears well in his gold eyes.

‘Stay *away* from Hannibal Lecter,’ he begs, adding an extra whine in there for good measure. *Anything* to keep Beverly safe.

To keep her *alive*.

But Beverly just rolls her eyes at him. She doesn’t believe him. Thinks he’s just an over-emotional Omega having a lover’s quarrel with his mate.

Fucking Alpha pride.

‘The Chesapeake Ripper *kept* surgical trophies,’ she says. ‘If *Hannibal’s* the Ripper, what’s he doing with his trophies?’

The answer comes slowly, but not slowly enough to keep the shock from dousing his system in ice. To keep his crest from flashing with razor agony.

Crows caw. Bloodied beaks peck at chunks of flesh on Cassie Boyle.

Cassie Boyle. Missing lungs.

Hannibal, feeding him a protein scramble to start the day… Courting him…

I can provide for you. I can hunt for you. Kill for you.

They weren't smoked sausages… It wasn't pork that he chewed and savored.

No wonder he fed me Abigail's ear… He was just making me more like him…

'He… he's eating them,' he whispers, his face draining of color and mouth wet with too much spit. His head spins, and he barely registers the shock on Beverly's face before his vision greys out.

Was I attracted to him because of Garrett Jacob Hobbs? I Imprinted on one cannibal, and bonded to another…

Jerking back as far as his shackles will allow, Will takes one last breath and then vomits all over his shoes.

***

It doesn't take Jack and his team long to make the connection between the two victims and their acupuncturist, Catherine Pimms. She answers on Jack's first knock, and invites them into her house. Jack wrinkles his nose against the stink of incense mingled with strange herbs and the overpowering aroma of fresh honey.

Catherine Pimms is an Alpha, and she has a predator's smile, but her pale eyes are dead inside, like an attacking shark's.

'When was the last time you saw Duncan Halloran or Lloyd Roat?' Price asks, giving Jack the chance to peruse the room for any weapons or traps.

'Whenever our last appointments were,' Catherine replies. She has a deep, husky voice. A smoker's voice, though she no longer smells of tobacco. 'I can check in my calendar, if you want?'

'Sure.' Price smiles.

'Have you found them?' Catherine asks, turning from her dresser.

'Yes, we have,' Zeller replies, turning to face her, his shoulders squared and hands balled into fists in the pockets of his leather jacket. 'Mr Halloran is deceased, and Mr Roat might as well be.'

'Phew!' Catherine turns to Jack, her eyes flashing crimson, and grins. 'Poor Mr Halloran,' she croons, wandering closer. Jack looks down his nose at her.

'What were you treating him for?'

‘That man trudged from disease to disease,’ Catherine replies, shaking her head in pity. ‘He had severe combined immunodeficiency. Life didn’t seem to be going his way. Please.’ She invites Price and Zeller to sit with them. Price takes a seat beside Jack. Zeller perches on the arm of a chair.

‘Thank you,’ Jack says, sinking onto the couch next to her chair.

‘Hmm…’ Catherine purrs. It is a low, thick sound, like a jungle cat after a good meal. ‘I find that, er… people don’t *get* their own way because, er…’ She smiles, her eyes wet. ‘They often don’t know *themselves* where that way *leads*.’ She looks down at her hands, twisted together in her lap. ‘In Ancient China, it was customary to er, *quiet* the minds of Omegas, after their first heat… It gave them peace, and a clearer sense of purpose. To solely fulfil the needs of their Alpha.’

Jack is quiet, waiting for Catherine to continue. After a moment, she does.

‘Mr Halloran… he couldn’t envision a dignified end of life,’ she explains. ‘So it’s much nicer to die… well, for *him*, to die in a meadow, with a head full of bees.’ A little smile, innocent and somehow more terrifying for its sweetness.

Zeller raises his eyebrows at Jack, but the Alpha shushes him.

Not yet.

‘Have you tried the honey?’ Catherine asks, looking from Jack to Zeller. Jack shakes his head.

‘No.’

‘I couldn’t bring myself to, either,’ Catherine admits. ‘It seemed too morbid.’ She smiles at Price, who stares at her in fascination. At her interpretation of ancient lore and religion.

‘So, you left him in a field to die?’ Jack asks. He needs to check, for the confession.

‘I *brought* him to the field to die,’ Catherine corrects. ‘I didn’t kill him. I *quieted* his mind, so that he could die in peace.’

‘But, he wasn’t an Omega,’ Price says, tilting his head at her. Catherine smiles, and purrs again.

‘Betas are a half-blood mix between Alpha and Omega,’ she says, too gently to be taken as the insult that it is. ‘Why shouldn’t he be treated as one, in his time of need?’

Zeller makes a noise of disgust, and Jack gives him another warning look.

‘And Mr Roat?’ he says, drawing Catherine’s attention to himself again. ‘You *quieted* his mind, too?’

‘Oh, him…’ Catherine sighs. ‘He suffered crippling arthritis. After he was quieted, I saw him walk pain-free for the very first time in his *life*.’

Zeller ducks his head, swallowing hard at the insanity before him. At the mindless cruelty.

‘I can’t make pain go away,’ Catherine says, her lower lip trembling. ‘But I *can* make it so that it doesn’t *matter*.’ She smiles. ‘I protected them. That’s what we do; Alphas. We *protect* those we care about. I *protected* these people… from hopelessness. And that’s beautiful.’

***

At 4.15pm that afternoon, Hannibal opens his office door to find Bella Crawford waiting for him. She is wearing white, a traditional funereal color, but manages an exhausted smile when she sees him.

‘Please, come in,’ Hannibal says, and offers her his arm. Supports her weight as they make their way, painfully slowly, to the leather armchairs in the middle of the room, and Bella’s breath is labored from the effort of it.

‘It’s a little unnerving,’ she wheezes, gripping tight to Hannibal’s arm, her own hand thin and fragile as a bird. ‘Not being able to walk across the floor.’

‘Nothing can be so unnerving for someone strong as being weak,’ Hannibal says, easing her down into Will’s chair.

I would know, he thinks. *Will makes me weak, where I am normally so strong.*

‘I was *so* weak after chemotherapy,’ Bella says, setting her coat and bag down so that she can settle. ‘Jack had to *physically* pick me up.’ She huffs a bitter laugh. ‘It was the second time he carried me across the threshold.’

Hannibal smiles, and leaves her for a moment to close the door.

‘I brought you something,’ Bella continues, wrapping her cashmere cardigan closer about herself and nodding to the little black gift bag beside her purse.

‘A gift?’ Hannibal emits a low purr of appreciation at the gesture. He pulls out a flat red box, inset with a gold rooster coin.

‘Paying my debt,’ Bella sighs, smiling up at him. Hannibal hums, and removes the coin from its case.

‘Coq Gaulois.’ He looks at her, his eyes sparking with interest, and Bella’s smile widens. She blinks slowly, lazily, her eyelids heavy and pupils dilated.

‘For helping me understand,’ she explains. Pauses to take a slow, deep breath, struggling for air. ‘That death is not a defeat… but a *cure*.’

Hannibal’s lips curve into a small, knowing smile. He sets the coin down and sits, perched on the edge of his chair, hands clasped before him, gaze fixed on the drugged Omega before him.

‘What have you taken, Bella?’

‘My morphine,’ Bella whispers, her eyes bright with tears. ‘Every bit of it.’

Hannibal is quiet. He can hear it now; the slowing of her heart. The way her lungs falter. Forgetting to inflate. Her body is shutting down. Her mind fading.

‘I didn’t wanna die at home,’ Bella says, her head now swaying as the tide sucks out in her mind. It’s like sinking into a warm bath… Like falling asleep… ‘I didn’t want *Jack* to find me. I didn’t want him to make that…’ A pause. Frown. Trying to remember how to speak. ‘Call…’

She sways again, as though fighting the swell of a ship.

‘To be in the room with my body… waiting… for it to become some *ceremonial*… object… apart from... apart from *him*… separate from who *I* was…’

Hannibal listens quietly, accepting her reasoning. Understanding her.

‘Someone he can only…’ Bella pauses, sighing heavily as her heartbeat falters. ‘H-hold in his m-mind…’ She closes her eyes.

Hannibal regards her sadly, a part of him mourning the waste of her life, another admiring her strength. More than anything, though, he feels… nothing. Will is the only one who makes him feel true emotions. What he evokes now is an imitation.

A mask.

‘You denied him his goodbye,’ he says softly, and he watches as Bella frowns at this.

‘I denied him…’ She tries to swallow, but her throat is no longer working. ‘… A *painful*… goodbye…’ Another sigh. The flicker of a smile. ‘And allowed myself a peaceful one.’ More wheezing. Bella’s lungs can barely expand now. ‘Tell Jack…’ Pause. Breathe. ‘I love him very much.’

‘Yes,’ Hannibal whispers, burgundy eyes warm as he gazes upon her face. On her peace. Her *acceptance* of death. Bella Crawford has never been more alive than in this moment, when she faces the dark and dreamless sleep. A single tear falls down the Omega's cheek, and Bella’s gaze grows distant as her vision fades.

‘Goodbye,’ she whispers. ‘… Dr Lecter…’

Her shoes slide forwards. Her hand falls, limp at her side and she slumps in the chair. Unconsciousness, followed by death.

Hannibal watches as the pulse in her throat lessens, the beat no longer pressing against her ashen skin.

‘Goodbye, Bella.’

The silence of death is complete. A living body moves, be it breath or a pulse, ticks and twitches to prove to the universe that a soul resides in the flesh. Bella Crawford sits still.

Hannibal watches her for several moments, and then sits back in his chair. Crosses one long leg over the other and reaches for the gold rooster.

Heads, you live. Tails, you die.

Curious, he flips the coin up into the air. It turns, over and over, before falling to land, heads up, in his palm.

Interesting.

Moving quickly, he rises and pockets the coin. Strides to his medicine cabinet and collects his surgeon's bag, removing a syringe and measuring a dose of naloxone to counteract the morphine. Returning to Bella's side, he holds her head up so that he can inject the drug directly into her jugular.

It's not your time. Not yet.

Bella's eyelids flutter and she stirs. Takes a breath, struggling to focus on him as Hannibal cradles each side of her face to hold her steady.

When she realizes what he's done, what he's *denied* her, her irises flood gold and tears run freely down her cheeks.

'No…' she whispers. Broken. Defeated. '*No*…'

Hannibal holds her steady, his gaze calm. Dispassionate.

Yes.

***

Wiping sweat from his brow, Will sinks back onto his heels. He's been curled around the toilet bowl since Matthew took him back to his cell, since Beverly left him after he'd thrown up his breakfast at the knowledge, the *realization* that Hannibal, *his Alpha*, was the Chesapeake Ripper.

A cannibal.

How many meals has he prepared for me? Will thinks, his stomach twisting again. *God… How many people have I eaten?*

The demon watches him from the shadows. Not a demon… Will knows what it is now. Knows the folklore… The origin of the monster that haunts his dreams.

A wendigo.

Desiccated skin, clinging to jutting bones. An emaciated man, always starving. Always needing *more*. Razor antlers, rising from his skull. Wide, white, blank eyes.

Dead eyes.

Hannibal is dead inside.

His lecture notes float before his eyes, and Will reads his own scrawling handwriting, muttering under his breath as he flicks through pages and pages of theories on the Chesapeake Ripper.

'He is an educated man. Refined. Someone with surgical knowledge. He doesn't see his victims as people, or as *prey*, but as pigs. Nothing more than swine to be slaughtered, in the same way we view livestock. He feels very little human emotion, and no empathy for his fellow man. He has been traumatised in his early life, most likely by the violent death or mutilation of a close family member, likely a sibling, and, as a result, he makes no emotional connections in his adult life.'

Hannibal once told him that it was hard for him to imagine finding someone worthy. Someone with whom he could share myself, his true self. With whom he could enjoy his passions and desires…

He wants me to hunt with him. Kill with him.

Gasping and whimpering, Will scratches deep welts into his forearms. He sheds his jumpsuit, trying to claw out the dirty feeling beneath his skin. Tugs at his hair until tears spring to his eyes. Scrubs at his cheeks and scores his nails across his tender chest.

It's *inside* him.

I let him fuck me. Let him stain me with his seed. Let him bite me. Bond me. Own me.

He can't stop the spiralling thoughts. The swirling litany of self-loathing.

'I transferred my passion for anatomy into the culinary arts.'

A strangled laugh bubbles up from his raw throat, and Will grinds his forehead against the damp bricks of his cell wall. God; Hannibal had all but *told* him! He'd *told* him! Right there! And Will had *laughed*. He'd thought it was a *joke*.

He killed Tobias for me… Who else has he killed for me?

Cassie Boyle's body… So perfectly positioned… "Field kabuki."

'It's like he had to show me a negative so that I could *see* the positive.'

Hot tears splash from bloodshot eyes, stinging the cuts he's given himself. Cassie Boyle… Hannibal killed her for *him*. To help him find Garrett Jacob Hobbs…

His shadow purrs at the thought, and Will spins, dry-heaving at his own callousness. At his own *pleasure* at having such a strong and devoted Alpha.

He really would do anything for me.

Gripping the crest on the back of his neck, Will opens his mouth in a silent scream and yanks it as hard as he can. Hot agony rips through him and he collapses, sweating and shaking, making the most pathetic sounds. Strangled little mewls and whimpers, pushing past swollen lips no matter how hard he bites his knuckles to stifle them.

Through the haze of pain, he hears a distant buzz and then footsteps approaching. At least three sets… He looks up to see Dr Chilton, flanked by Matthew and the Alpha guard, their eyes glowing red at the sound and smell of him.

'How long has he been like this?' Chilton demands, frowning at the damage Will's done to himself. He holds the crest brace and a tranquilizer shot in one hand, the other gripped tight around his walking cane.

'He's not been right since his visit this morning,' Matthew admits, and ducks his head when the other Alpha gives him a sharp look.

'Get this door open,' Chilton barks, raising his voice over the clatter of keys. 'Alright, Will, I'm going to give you something for the anxiety. Help you calm down.'

Anxiety?

Will huffs a laugh and renews his efforts at clawing out his crest. Blood runs down his back and he bares his teeth in a snarl when Matthew reaches for him. Hisses his fury at having his arms grabbed, bucking and squirming as Matthew and the other Alpha, Jason, drag him to his cot.

'Get it *off* me!' he growls, bloodshot gold eyes wild with pain as he twists and reaches, again, for the swollen crest on the nape of his neck. 'Get it off!'

'Alright, Will, this will help,' Chilton says, his pompous voice ringing out over the squeak of sneakers on the floor and the scuffle of the struggling Alphas. He uncaps the tranquilizer and leans forward. Matthew winds a vinyl-gloved hand through Will's shaggy curls and wrenches his head to the side, giving Chilton access to his throat.

Will feels the sting of the needle, the rush of cool fluid entering his veins, and then everything loses focus. He's floating, only vaguely aware of his head being shifted and the soft leather of the crest brace collar slipping around his throat. Smells plastic near his mouth and snaps for the finger barely an inch from his lips. There's a shout, a sharp whiff of fear and then the metal bars of the brace squeeze tight, pinching deep into his torn flesh and paralyzing him.

Will sinks into the dark current of his mind, warm and falsely content as his manipulated crest releases waves of dopamine into his system. The cherub-painted room flashes before his eyes but he's too sluggish to reach for the handle, and he lets it slip away as he falls, ever deeper, into the black.

Hannibal…

Very distantly, he feels a flicker of concern. A spark of something burning hot and possessive. Hannibal's love for him is a cruel thing; he wants to *own* him. To devour him.

As his eyes close to the dingy cell around him, Will's last thought before drugged sleep takes him is that, if he ever does get out of here, he needs to find a way to make Hannibal vulnerable, too.

We need to be equals, now, more than ever.

***

Saul Abrams-Katz met his Alpha in college.

Hiding from a gang of jocks in the forensic pathology section of the campus library, he'd bumped into Beverly, both literally and figuratively, on the third floor, sending them both flying and spilling her iced mocha all down her white blouse. Stammering apologies and blushing hard enough to make his eyes turn gold, Saul had then tried to dab away the stain with his handkerchief, effectively groping her until Beverly held him still and checked that *he* was okay.

Sometimes, Saul thinks that first encounter still sums up their whole relationship. Beverly has always cleaned up whatever mess he's gotten himself into, and been there to take care of him. She's provided him with a nice home, encouraged him to pursue an academic career and given him free rein to socialize with whoever he wants.

There's no better Alpha.

In the kitchen of their apartment, smiles to himself as Beverly's cell clicks to voicemail. She's working late, again, and he's about to head out to his weekly poker game. He fusses their Persian cat, Jericho, as he listens to the greeting, and then moves his hand before the big fluffy sadist can look up from his over-priced food and claw him.

'Hey, Honey-bee,' he says, adding a touch of his Omega Voice to soothe her, if she's had a tough day. 'Just checkin' in. I'm off to Steve's for a game and a few beers. I'll be back by eleven, twelve at the latest. We're runnin' low on milk, so could you swing by the store on your way home and get some? I love you; can't wait to see you, beautiful.'

On her way up to Jack Crawford's office at the FBI headquarters, Quantico, Beverly smiles as she listens to her Omega's message. Saul's called her Honey-bee since they were first courting, and she still wears the cheap gold necklace with a little honey pot on it that he won for her in a slot machine on their second date.

Peering into Jack's office, she frowns. He's not behind his desk, but he's normally still here at this time.

Zeller's familiar scent catches her attention and she turns, striding to catch up with the Beta as he heads back to the lab.

'Hey, have you seen Jack?'

Zeller turns, worrying his lower lip.

‘Oh, there was some emergency with his wife,’ he says, dark eyes flashing in sympathy. ‘Dr Lecter called from the hospital; asked him to come down.’

Beverly purses his lips, her chest tightening. She can’t imagine how she’d cope if Saul ever got cancer.

‘Is Mrs Crawford okay?’ she asks, and Zeller swallows. Shrugs, still worried. Jack must have left in a mad rush to have created such an impression on him.

‘I don’t know, he didn’t say.’

Beverly nods, an idea forming in her mind.

‘So, Hannibal’s at the hospital, too?’ she asks, hands on her hips.

Stay away from Hannibal Lecter… Will’s warning echoes in her mind; the sheer *panic* on the Omega’s face and the tone had planted a seed of doubt deep in her mind, and she won’t be able to rest until she knows for sure, one way or another.

If Hannibal is out…

‘Yeah,’ Zeller says, nodding. ‘Yeah, I think they’ll be there a while.’

***

Picking the lock to the Alpha’s Baltimore townhouse is surprisingly easy, and Beverly holds her breath for an alarm as she eases the door away from her.

Nothing.

Sighing at her luck, she crosses the threshold into Hannibal’s spacious kitchen and peers around. It’s dark, but she can make out the cabinets and gleaming utensils. Hannibal has expensive taste, and the room looks like a cross between a professional chef’s kitchen and an autopsy room.

Morbid thought…

Pulling on a pair of gloves, she eases the door closed behind her and hears the latch click shut. Feels sweat prickle her brow and counts to three as she slows down her breathing, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the gloom.

If I were a cannibalistic serial killer, where would I keep my trophies?

She checks the refrigerator first. It’s big, and filled with organic produce, expensive condiments and grease-paper wrapped meats with neat labels stamped across the front from the local butcher’s shop.

None of it *looks* human…

Swinging her flashlight around, Beverly's gaze lands on a closed door off to the side. She rattles the handle and narrows her eyes. Locked.

Crouching, she holds the light between her teeth as she slides the pick into the lock. A couple of wiggles, a twist and it springs open, granting her access.

The butcher's pantry is pristine, and filled with even more expensive utensils.

No wonder he charges as much as he does for his therapy, she thinks, wandering closer to the glass-fronted refrigerator filled with home-made sauces. *He couldn't afford all this with a salary like mine.*

There's something else on the shelves, and Beverly sets the flashlight down to get a closer look. Pulls open the doors and lifts up a vacuum-sealed plastic packet of dark meat. No label. Not shop-bought…

'Gotcha,' she whispers, her heart skipping a beat. Turning, her elbow catches a carafe of wine on the counter, and she grabs for it before it can fall and smash. Sets it back into place and then frowns as the spilled wine trickles down between the dark floorboards. A distant splash suggests a long drop.

A cellar, maybe?

It doesn't take her long to find the door. Another lock picked, and Beverly descends the creaking stairs to a vast, dark basement. Fear chokes her now, and she can feel how red her eyes must be. Each pulse of her heart deafens her with the rush of blood in her ears, and her t-shirt sticks to the small of her back as sweat dribbles down her spine.

This is really, really *wrong*.

Plastic strips hang down from metal rails on the ceiling, like the separations of an abattoir. Beverly pulls her gun out, holding it between slick palms as she steps further into the cavernous room.

He kills in here… This is where he kills them…

She can smell the death in the air. It's soaked into the concrete of the walls and floor. So much pain and fear.

The Ripper is a sadist. He kills slowly, and he *enjoys* it.

Something behind a sheet of plastic catches her attention. Beverly lowers her gun, her right hand groping beside her for the light switch. She flicks it on, staring with dawning horror as the overhead lights reveal the truth in all its detail.

Torn flesh, sawn limbs, face in a rictus of pain…

Hannibal Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper.

‘Oh my God,’ she whispers, her heart stuttering behind the bones of her ribcage. It pounds like a trapped thing, desperate to get free. To fuel her body with the strength she needs to escape. And then, as her Alpha senses explode into overdrive, filling her with rut hormones, she realizes she can hear a second heartbeat, slow and steady. Smell a second scent, smoky with anger. Sharp with purpose.

Turning, her mouth turns to ash as she sees Hannibal behind her.

***

Returning from Bella Crawford’s sick bed, his cheek still stinging from her slap, Hannibal pauses when he notices the car parked down the street from his house. A new car, but one he has seen before, at Quantico. He narrows his eyes, suspicion flaring, and cuts the engine of his Bentley before alerting anyone to his presence.

Moving quietly, he sheds his coat and slips in through the unlocked back door to his kitchen. Beverly Katz’s scent, salty with fear, hangs like cobwebs in the air. He can smell her perfume, the leather of her jacket and the rose of her shampoo. Smell coffee from her breath and the faint stink of gunpowder.

She’s armed.

Crossing on silent feet, he checks his larder. A packet of meat sits on the work surface, and spilled wine stains the floorboards. Through a crack, he catches the faintest hint of a flashlight.

A peculiar mix of emotions flash through him, rooting him in place. Anger, of course; they are both Alphas, and she has violated his sanctuary. Broken into his home with the intention of stealing from him.

Fear; barely a trickle, because he is in his prime, and he knows how to fight, but there is always a concern, especially when firearms are involved.

I’m sorry, Will.

His strongest emotion is something he doesn’t immediately recognize. Disappointment?

Regret…

Beverly is Will’s friend. One of the few he has left. Hannibal has always liked her, always respected her, but he must protect himself and his mate above all else. But Will is going to be heartbroken, and angry. So very, very angry. He is already in pain – Hannibal felt a flash of something earlier, though without his visitation rights he has no way of investigating the cause of it.

Losing Beverly is going to break Will’s heart, but the Alpha made her choice. Hannibal warned her. He invited her to understand, and now she must pay for that knowledge.

Descending the stairs, silent on the edges of the old wood, Hannibal slips from shadow to shadow as Beverly swings her beam of light around. She is sloppy. She thinks she’s alone, so

focused on her own body that she doesn't smell him. He can smell her. The salt of her sweat is strong, now. Her fear is palpable, leaving a sweet coating on his tongue.

I wish you could be here with me, Will. I wish you could hunt with me. How terrible and beautiful we would be.

The light flickers, and Beverly's pulse begins to race. Standing behind her, Hannibal takes a slow, deep breath, allowing a single growl to rumble across the air between them.

He sees the moment she stiffens. The moment she realizes she is not alone. He sees the terror in her eyes when she turns, watches her pupils shrink and hears her lips part as she struggles for air.

You couldn't leave it alone, could you?

Hannibal sighs, and draws in his strength. Time slows, and he watches, detached, as Beverly raises her gun. His rage spikes, and he curls his lips back from sharp teeth.

She is no match for him.

He lunges to the side. Snaps the light off, and disappears into the dark.

Shots ring out. One. A pause, and then two… three, four, five, before silence falls.

In the hallway above, the grandfather ticks away the seconds, steady in the quiet of the house.

It's over.

Mukōzuke

Chapter Summary

Distraught by the murder of Beverly Katz, Will reaches out through Freddy Lounds to contact his admirer, who reveals himself to be his Alpha Orderly, Matthew Brown. In a dangerous ploy to rid himself of his bond to Hannibal, Will agrees to let Matthew mate with him if he kills Dr Lecter.

Chapter Notes

Hey peeps, sorry this took a while to write! I've been hard at work on Silence the Lambs AND my own novel, Hybrid, which my wife has just started to read out as a free audiobook on her YouTube channel.

So much writing!

Anywho, I hope you enjoy, and I am SO looking forward to Will and Hannibal getting together again. Bring on the release from BSHCI in Chapter Seven!!!

Comments etc are, as always, very much appreciated. Hope you enjoy! xxx

FIVE

Mukōzuke

For the first time in his life, Hannibal Lecter can’t sleep.

Lying on his back, on his side of the bed, he stares up at the white ceiling and tries to imagine it is painted with cherubs. Tries to imagine himself surrounded, not by silk and blue velvet, but soft white and rose marble. By gilded mirrors and his mother’s furniture, reconstructed with loving care from his own memory vaults.

But the bedroom he shares with Will in their mind palace is empty, and he feels the silence too sharply for comfort. Instead of water splashing outside, and a child’s distant laughter, Hannibal hears the clatter of a deer skull boiling in Mischa’s copper bathtub. The sound drives him from the palace room, and he waits out the early hours wandering the halls, savoring the architecture and beautiful sculptures as he waits for the fear to subside.

Will has been drugged. Hannibal recognizes the feeling; the unnatural heaviness of his Omega's unconsciousness seeping like tar through their bond. A sedative, after the rush of panic and revulsion flooding Will's body last night.

What caused so much distress? So much pain?

The agony had been brief, but Hannibal had felt it like a knife in his chest, and the skin on his throat had broken out in a rash, subsiding only after Will had calmed down. He knew what it meant; even without a double bond, he had reacted physically to Will's crest being damaged.

A biological incentive to protect him. To fight for him.

If another Alpha managed to subdue Will and bite the crest from him, re-bonding him in the process, the shock of it could easily kill Hannibal. As it stands, it is all he can do to keep from storming into the hospital and demanding to see his mate, to touch him, hold him and mark him with his scent.

Perhaps later. For now, he will give Will the isolation he has forced upon himself. Chilton would never have dared keep Hannibal away without the proper *persuasion*. Something only an Omega could do.

Sighing to himself, he scrubs at the stubble on his cheeks and sits up. As early as it is, Jack Crawford is most likely still awake. Perhaps he would like breakfast. A suitable distraction for them both, and a way of ensuring that Hannibal eats, at least once, today. His appetite has been slowly declining since his last visit with Will.

As he rises to pull on slacks and a soft red sweater, Hannibal feels a twinge in the back of his neck, and a stirring as his Omega's sedative wears off. Closing his eyes, he focuses on sending a wave of calming warmth to his mate, and is rewarded by a spark of affection in return.

Not much, but better than nothing.

Across the city, as the lights in the high security ward of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane flicker on, Will Graham opens his eyes.

An Orderly has removed his crest brace during the night, allowing the ridges to heal. Will wakes flat on his back, his mouth dry as cotton wool and a bitter taste coating his tongue. Before last night's fear can return, however, his shoulders relax as a sense of calm and *love* wash over him, slowing his racing heart.

Hannibal…

Growling to himself, he quickly dampens the feelings he has for his Alpha, and struggles to his feet. He feels weak, and wobbles his way over to the toilet to relieve himself. Leaves his jumpsuit in a heap on the floor in the hopes that it will get replaced today, and sits with his back to the cool stone walls, eyes closed so that he can go fishing as he waits for breakfast.

Soft piano notes drift on the breeze, and Will frowns as he feels hard shells beneath his hands. He looks down, and, instead of the river, sees a colander of scallops in the brushed steel of Hannibal's sink.

Who are you cooking for?

As the edges of their conscious brush, Will feels Hannibal's purr, and he watches in his mind's eye as the other man scrambles eggs into light, creamy clouds, cooking pork into perfectly crisp shards and plating them up alongside crayfish.

This is a new form of torture, Will thinks, and he tries as hard as he can to show Hannibal his own breakfast when the tray arrives. Grey porridge, powdered eggs, stale bread, beef paste and a cup of weak, bitter coffee. It works; his own displeasure is overwhelmed by the sense of his Alpha's *disgust* at the abhorrent offering.

You put me here, he thinks, sinking down onto the uneven springs of his cot mattress and severing the connection with what he hopes is a snap to Hannibal's mind. *This is your fault.*

***

Carrying the china plates into his dining room, Hannibal winces at the grey light stabbing at his eyes. Will's anger has left him with a headache.

His fellow Alpha stands by the doors, staring out into Hannibal's small back garden. Jack Crawford is a mess; tie removed, still wearing the same rumpled suit from last night. From the smell of cheap coffee on his breath and disinfectant on his skin, it is clear that he spent the night at the hospital with Bella.

Hannibal approaches, and gives his shoulder a comforting squeeze.

'You have to eat something, Jack,' he says softly. 'You've been up all night.'

Dazed, Jack does as he is told, moving at a glacial pace. Hannibal sits, and tugs his heavy chair towards the table.

'Feed the body, feed the mind,' he says, hoping that his advice works for himself.

Sighing, Jack sinks into the chair at the head of the table, glassy eyes passing over the ornate flower arrangement, freshly squeezed orange juice and expensive coffee.

Will's favorite coffee.

'She knew she couldn't beat the cancer, so she… decided to beat it to the finish line,' Jack says heavily, heaving another slow, sad breath.

Hannibal eats his eggs as he waits for Jack to continue. After a moment, he does.

'I suppose I can't blame her for wanting to control how she dies.'

Hannibal, when he speaks, keeps his eyes on his fork.

‘I believe those who can no longer function at an acceptable level have the right to die,’ he says. Takes another mouthful of egg and chews slowly.

Jack shakes his head, looking sick.

‘She cast *you* as an executioner,’ he says quietly. ‘She wanted to die.’

She did, Hannibal thinks, picking up his coffee cup and swirling it to release its delicate aroma into the air. *Chance denied her that.*

Jack blinks away tears, but his voice is still tight and rasping when he speaks.

‘I can’t tell you how grateful I am that you didn’t allow it to happen.’

Hannibal lifts one shoulder in a shrug.

‘As a doctor, I had no choice,’ he replies. Looks directly at Jack and adds, ‘As a philosopher, I had too many.’ Jack blinks, surprised by the admission, and Hannibal continues, ‘It wasn’t what I could do for Bella, it was what I couldn’t do to *you*, Jack.’ At the way the other man’s lips tighten and brow furrows, he can tell it means the world to him. Sighing, he looks back at his cup. ‘Guess I’m a better friend than a therapist.’

Jack forces a wobbly smile, and takes a sip of his own coffee.

‘You’re a great friend, Hannibal.’

Setting the drink down, Hannibal clasps his hands before his mouth and watches as Jack begins to tuck into the offering.

I only wish I was as good a mate.

***

“There is a new installment in Dr Chilton’s favorite observatory.”

The anonymous tip, texted to her cell phone from an unrecognized number, chills Freddy’s blood. Pulling up outside the Baltimore Observatory at 8.52am, she eases the gun from her purse as she ascends the stairs, her heart hammering in her throat. Her eyes prickle red and her breath comes in short, sharp bursts as she climbs higher.

Up to the top floor, to the room where Dr Gideon had cut open Frederick Chilton. Water drips. Splashes and gathers on the marble floor.

Blood seeps from between the panes of glass.

Oh my God…

Freddy feels her eyes widen. Feels them pulse crimson as panic buzzes in her ears. She trembles, fumbling to swap her gun for her camera Takes two, three, four photographs, struggling to focus as nausea rises.

When she's got the shot, Freddy spins, and clatters down the stairs as she dials the number for the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit.

'You need to pass a message to Jack Crawford. *Now*.'

***

Jack arrives within the hour.

When Freddy sees him, her chest aches and she surprises herself with the *honesty* of her concern for him. Holds up a hand to pause him, and shakes her head when she sees him staring at the observatory.

'Send someone else, Jack,' she says, feeling her own eyes still ringed with red. 'She's one of yours.'

Ignoring her, his mouth set into a grim line, Jack enters the observatory. He has to see. He has to *know*.

Thawing slowly in the chill of the Baltimore winter morning, Beverly Katz hangs, suspended, in six sections. She has been sliced lengthways, each layer thinner, less substantial than the last, pressed between sheets of Perspex. Her organs, her muscles, nerves and bones are all exposed.

Jack stares, numbly watching as blood oozes down the side of the glass to stain the water gathering on the floor.

Something breaks inside him. He feels a sob bubbling up from his chest, erupting from between bared teeth, and then dizziness swamps him.

Bending, Jack braces himself on shaky knees, covering his face with one hand and trying not to breathe in the smell of her death. Of the pain still lingering on her skin.

How many more people am I going to lose?

***

He has to make a formal statement when he gets back to Quantico.

Jack summons Jimmy Price and Brian Zeller into his office, first, to inform them of their loss before they face the rest of the department. He speaks plainly, according them the respect that they deserve.

Jimmy's shock renders him silent, but Zeller's eyes well with tears before Jack has even finished speaking, and his shoulders shake with the force of his sobs. He falls over the chair on his way from the room, throwing up a hand to fend the Alpha away before he can vomit on him.

Turning to Jimmy, Jack sees his own despair echoed in the ashen, gaunt face of the Beta he has known for years.

This can't be real, can it?

***

At five minutes past ten, Jack stands at the front of the conference room, and speaks the spidery, tear-splotched words scribbled on a piece of card hidden in his hand.

'At approximately 9.00am this morning, I received a phone call from Freddy Lounds. Acting on an anonymous tip, she discovered a female body, and immediately contacted my office. I was amongst the first on the scene… The victim has been identified as our colleague; Special Agent Beverly Katz. She will be memorialized at FBI Headquarters and Field Offices, so that her ultimate sacrifice will *always* be remembered…' The remaining words seem hollow. Pointless. He sighs. 'That's all.'

The room is quiet as everyone absorbs the news. The grief is palpable. Beverly Katz was a well-known, well-respected and, ultimately, well-*liked* Alpha at the FBI. She had a lot of friends.

The Head of Human Resources offers grief counselling services to everyone, and then looks to Jack for confirmation before dismissing everyone. Jack sees Jimmy and Brian hang back as everyone else files from the room. Their eyes are bloodshot from crying, and Zeller's nose is still swollen, his cheeks blotchy beneath his dark stubble, but tears no longer fall. He approaches them, and Jimmy swallows before he squares his shoulders and meets his gaze.

'We're going to check on Saul,' the Beta says. 'Make sure he's… Well…

'See how he's doing,' Zeller finishes, and Jack's throat tightens.

'God… Saul…' He growls at his own thoughtlessness.

Saul… Beverly's *Omega*. He would have known, before any of them… He would have *felt* it the moment she died… Felt the pain of her death like his own, and then felt his crest, his bond to her, shrivel and flake away, leaving his nape virgin smooth.

Ready for a new Alpha.

A living Alpha.

'I'll drive,' Jack mutters, striding from the room. 'Let's go.'

***

The Abrams-Katz apartment is modest but comfortable. A tasteful mix of Asian and American culture; it blends modern, retro and vintage chic. There's the black coffee table, its lacquer buffed to an impossible shine, where they have all eaten takeout after Beverly's birthday night out. Bamboo furniture, and a 1950's jukebox, which still flips the little records before playing them. A good-sized kitchen, all dark wood and granite surfaces.

Testing the handle after his knocking goes unanswered, Jack's stomach crawls when the apartment door swings away from him. Brian and Jimmy exchange worried looks, and stay

close to Jack's heel as they step inside.

'Hello?' Jack calls, peering around the ajar door into the master bedroom. 'Anybody home? Saul? It's Jack Crawford, from the FBI. I need to know if you're alright.'

Listening over the thud of his heart, he hears running water. A shower, perhaps? Jack frowns, his hand on his gun. He points the Betas towards the lounge and kitchen, and kicks open the bedroom door.

The room, one of the largest in the apartment, is a mess. The bedcovers are twisted where Saul clearly writhed in agony. There are clothes strewn everywhere, hanging from the open doors of the closet, and the cream carpet sparkles with broken glass. Jack frowns, crunching a shard beneath his foot as he steps inside. Beverly and Saul's wedding photo is in the middle of the bed, the glass smashed and smeared with dried blood.

It happened hours ago.

A cat meows, and Jack turns, frowning down at it. At its pink paws…

His eyes travel to the water seeping beneath the bathroom door to his right. To the streaks of red in it…

And then he's moving, kicking open the door and yelling. Shouting for Brian and Jimmy to help him pull Saul from the bath.

To call an ambulance, *now*, even though it's too late.

It's far too late.

***

Alana insists that they tell Will.

Jack drives her, and they sit across from him in the privacy room, staring into his pale, grey-tinged face as he absorbs the news.

Beverly's dead.

She's dead.

Hannibal killed her.

His mate *killed* her.

He can barely breathe. Instead of his heartbeat, he hears water. A trickle at first – melting ice dribbling down the panes of glass containing Beverly's sliced body, building to the rush of dark, angry waters as his dark shadow swells and his hatred grows.

Hannibal *killed* Beverly. He took her life, cut her up and displayed her in the observatory, for Jack to find. To hurt him. To hurt everyone.

What part of her is he going to eat?

Bile rises, and he wonders if he'll be sick again.

His eyes slide over to Beverly's ghost, a silent sentinel by the window. Jack is still talking, but Will can't hear him. He can't hear anything.

I told you to stay away from Hannibal Lecter.

Beverly says nothing. What can she say? She's dead. She didn't listen to him, and now she's dead.

Will feels his eyes prickle as the irises flood gold, rich as amber.

Dark with rage.

'I wanna see her.'

***

After trying to bite one of the orderlies, Dr Chilton's compromise with Jack Crawford is that, in order to leave the hospital, Will now has to wear a straightjacket, a crest brace *and* a muzzle. The Chief of Staff clearly fears that his 'cannibalistic nature' will get the better of him once he smells fresh air.

Will grits his teeth as Matthew slides his arms into the heavy jacket, and ignores the immediate itch on his nose as the straps pull tight, forcing him to hug himself. Buckles clink down his back and Matthew gives his shoulder a quick, reassuring squeeze before he and two fellow orderlies ease him back onto the moving trolley, securing him with thick, padded straps.

'Dr Chilton had this specially made for you,' the wiry Alpha murmurs, holding up what looks like the lower half of a clear hockey mask. Will's golden eyes drop to the metal crest brace attached to the straps at the back of the mask, and he realizes it's a muzzle and brace in one.

No doubt Frederick has already patented the design.

Holding his breath, he tries not to let his worry show as Matthew slides the mask up and over his face, settling it against his cheeks and feeding the straps over his head to flatten his curls. The collar comes up around his throat to Velcro at the base of his skull, and then Matthew tightens the bars on the brace, until Will feels his crest pulse in one short, sharp cramp, before a curious numbness overtakes him and he loses control of his body.

His instinct is to gasp, but he can't even do that. He just floats, held up only by the straps pinning him to the bars of the trolley, barely able to think, let alone plan an escape or worry about what he's going to find when they get to the observatory. He just *exists*, entirely at the mercy of the Alphas around him.

Matthew's clamp is far more dominant and overwhelming than Chilton's. Will wonders if the tightness of the brace is keeping him from feeling a prickle of fear, or if he just doesn't *mind*

the Orderly's controlling nature.

Wouldn't be the first overbearing Alpha in my life, he thinks, muzzily watching the walls of the prison go by as he is wheeled out to the van waiting to take him to the observatory. *I attract them like flies to honey.*

Matthew rides with him in the back of the van. He secures Will's trolley to the wall and floor, and then sits across from him, elbows on his knees and sharp eyes on Will's face. Will stares back, swaying with the motion as they begin the trek across Baltimore.

'You gave us all a bit of scare the other day,' Matthew says, his lips curving into a crooked smile. 'Hurting yourself like that… Trying to pull your crest off. You *were* pulling it off, weren't you?'

Will refuses to blink, just in case Matthew interprets it as confirmation. The van turns a corner and the trolley slides a few inches along the rubber flooring, tilting alarmingly before the straps snap taut and keep him from pitching over. Will's stomach flips and he is reminded of how very *vulnerable* he is. It only lasts for a moment, but it is so sudden and so strong that he feels his forehead shine with sweat.

'I won't let anything bad happen to you,' Matthew purrs, grinning as he lifts his nose to scent the air for Will's salty fear. 'As long as you're with me, you're safe.'

Safe as a condemned Omega can be while he awaits execution, Will thinks dryly. Imagines himself snorting as he adds, *Especially one mated to the Chesapeake Ripper.*

Freddy Lounds is ready with her camera when he arrives at the scene, and Will hears it clicking before he sees the tell-tale flash. Matthew wheels him onto the ramp and he is lowered to the road, photographed at every stage for what will undoubtedly be this evening's addition to TattleCrime.com.

Will stares at her, a yellow-eyed monster, a cannibal, a murderer. Lets his shadow dance in his pupils, and he sees Freddy's smug smile fade as fear licks at her insides.

Pulled backwards up the steps to the top floor of the observatory is jarring, and Will's bones ache by the time they arrive on the top floor. His Orderlies are both out of breath, not used to such strenuous exercise. Matthew takes over and wheels him forwards, until Will can see past the FBI agents in yellow-stamped jackets and blue gloves, to the six sheets of glass containing perfectly dissected pieces of Beverly Katz.

The brace keeps him from feeling anything and, for the first time, Will is grateful for it. It allows him to *see* the scene, to catalogue the settings, the all-important-details, without worrying about a panic attack.

Jack Crawford steps forward from where he'd been waiting for Will's arrival, and looks around at all the milling people. At the crest brace, muzzle and straightjacket rendering his Omegan empath useless.

‘Leave us alone,’ he says, his eyes flashing crimson when his order isn’t immediately followed. ‘Let’s go!’

One of the field officers looks over, exasperated, and then huffs as he realizes there’s no arguing with the Head of the BSU. Jack doesn’t look at him when he hears it; just growls, long and low, in warning.

He shields Will from the field officers’ wandering eyes as file past him, followed by a reluctant Matthew. The Orderly shoots one last look back at Will and Beverly’s body, and then hunches his shoulders, his hands deep in his jacket pockets, trudging downstairs to wait for his prisoner’s return.

Only when the room is empty does Jack pace around the trolley, coming to stand in front of the immobilized Omega. Will tracks him with his eyes, the gold fading back to thick rings around his blue irises as the Alpha’s calming pheromones begin to take effect on his body.

Jack sighs, and begins to unstrap him from the moving trolley. He is less than gentle, and makes a point of pressing the muzzle of his gun to Will’s cheek as he hauls him forwards to stand by himself on the floor. Shoves Will around and unbuckles the straight jacket with one hand, guiding him to drop it on the floor in the corner. Will tolerates the bullish manhandling without making a sound; even braced, he could still whine or whimper to trigger a comforting response from the Alpha. Jack is making a point of reminding him that, in his eyes, Will is still guilty, still a murderer.

They are here for Beverly. That’s all.

Finally, after one last warning frown, Jack releases the bars of the crest brace. He is careful as he eases the straps loose, and guides the muzzle up and away from Will’s face, his own expression softening at the red marks it has left in the Omega’s cheeks.

Awareness returns to Will’s body and he takes a deep breath, just because he *can*. With it, his senses explode and tears spring to his eyes at the *pain* in the room. The *loss*.

*F*ck*…

Jack’s grief is a gaping black hole. All-consuming, threatening to dismantle him. It hurts Will’s skin to be this close to him; he moves away, circling around the steps of shocked Betas and Alphas. Each one leaves an imprint in the air; an impression of their emotional response. Fear, disgust, sympathy. Anger… Something else… Something faint…

Jack tastes the air, noting the way Will’s scent thickens. It grows smoky when he does his thing; his interpretation… He turns and slips from the room, giving Will the space he needs. Glances back one last time in the doorway, his brow furrowed at the fine tremors wracking the pale man’s body.

She was rooting for you. And now she’s dead.

Closing his eyes, Will tries to find the stream. Tries to sink into the dark current and lose himself to the reconstruction.

Pain claws at his throat, trying to burst free in a howl. His eyes sting and the resonances scatter, like dust in the wind.

He can't do it. He can't. Not with her.

Scrubbing his hands over his face, Will tries to grind the image of Beverly's disassembled body from his retinas, tasting bile in the back of his mouth. It's too much. Too painful.

'Oh, *God*…'

His Beverly, his lasting impression of her, appears in the corner of his eye as he exhales slowly. She is dressed the same as the corpse, but her skin is a richer, fuller color.

The color of life.

'You said you just interpret the evidence,' she says softly, her expression sad as she watches him struggle. 'So interpret the evidence.'

She's right. Will sighs again, counting to five as he breathes out. Lowers his hands until his fingertips are barely brushing his chin, and reaches for the darkness warming his legs. He feels his shadow wind up his body, purring like a cat, and his own eyes flicker amber again. A response to the Alpha resonances.

His Alpha's resonances.

I know you.

Will closes his eyes, and greets the waiting darkness without fear. The pendulum swings, gold light flashing behind blind eyelids. The current swells, building momentum, and then…

The artistry is exquisite. Remove the crime scene detritus, remove the light… Slide the panels back together, the metal clicking as it connects at the corners…

There's a familiar scent on her… Very faint, but *there*.

Hannibal.

He killed her at his house, and then brought her here to display her.

Will circles the body. He can feel the life flowing back into Beverly's body. Time reverses. He *is* his Alpha. One half of a whole. The reconstruction is so easy this time, like remembering a dream.

Like remembering something *he* did.

I took you from behind.

He creeps from the shadows, a strong hand coming up around her throat, another around her chest even as she scrabbles at his knuckles, fighting him, her growls interrupted with panicked whimpers.

‘I strangle Beverly Katz…’ Will’s voice is detached. Cold. At odds with the hot passion he feels surging through him as he kills his fellow Alpha. ‘Looking in her eyes…’ Beverly groans, fighting to stay awake even as her windpipe is crushed. ‘She *knows* me…’ Will feels his irises itch to glow red. ‘And *I* know *her*.’

He snarls, baring teeth he wishes were fangs. His canines are sharp, but not as long as his ancestors’. As his father’s.

‘I expertly squeeze the life from her…’ The light starts to fade from Beverly’s eyes, her mouth growing slack. ‘Rendering her unconscious.’

She will never wake again.

‘I freeze her body.’ He sets the slab of meat on a large metal tray. ‘Preserving shape and form, so that I can more cleanly dismantle her.’

The industrial meat saw whirs to life with the push of a button, and Will eases Beverly’s body towards the blade.

‘She cuts like stone.’

He is calm. Composed. He’s never felt more serene, though there is a lingering sense of regret. Ms. Katz was always courteous, until she broke into his home. And Will liked her.

Will…

Heat floods his body. A maelstrom of emotions, each of them tainted with fear. With anger. Frustrated desire. Will turns away from them, fighting the effect they have on his body. Ignoring the slide of slick from inside him, the throb of fire in his crest and the pooling heat in his belly. He sinks further into the sense of *pride* in his work, into the effort and care that has gone into this tableau, and he calms again.

‘I pull her apart, layer by layer, like she would a crime scene.’

Like she did when she found me.

All those ugly variables. Each slice different from the last, but coming together to form one whole. He positioned them here, an exact distance apart from each other. A statement about the order rendered from the chaos of a crime scene.

Order out of death.

‘This is my design,’ Will purrs, and he turns golden eyes to the wendigo watching him from behind the last pane. Hidden in the shadows, Will can only see the sharp jutting bone of a shoulder and one towering antler. His demon lover is not yet ready to be seen, even by him.

‘I will leave no usable evidence,’ Will says, speaking half to himself, half to his demon. The wendigo tilts its head a fraction, and he frowns. ‘But… she found something… she found *me*…’

Drawing closer, the wendigo's wide, milky eyes bore into him, chilling his blood. Will lowers his eyes; a submissive gesture of appeasement, and the crest on the nape of his neck swells again, throbbing with heat that trickles down his spine to settle as an ache in his balls.

'What she found is already gone,' Will murmurs, and he frowns as he looks back up, right into the face of death. Of endless, insatiable hunger. 'What did I take from her?'

You know me... Come find me.

Returning to himself, Will hears a low whine hang in the air at his lips, before silence reclaims the room. A call for his Alpha. For his mate. Instead of Hannibal, however, he has drawn Jack. The burly Alpha comes to a stop beside Will's standing wheelchair, lip curling back from his teeth as his scent sharpens with rut hormones.

'It's the Chesapeake Ripper,' he growls, glaring at Beverly's display.

Will's stomach twinges, but he leaves his hands, curled into loose fists, at his sides.

'It's the Ripper,' he whispers, feeling pressure against his mind, like a gentle caress along the side of his face. 'And the Copycat. It's the same killer. Two masks.' He sighs, his temples throbbing, throat aching. 'Beverly helped me see it.'

'Help *me* see it,' Jack says, stepping up to stand beside him. Will fights back a growl, and resists the urge to shrink away from the other man. Jack's scent settles like ash on his skin, irritating his pores.

'She was looking for a connection between the Copycat and the Ripper,' he says quietly, and Jack nods.

'You think she found it?'

'She found *something*,' Will reasons, his heart beating very fast and his palms tingling. Rage licks at his insides and he bites his lip, hard, before looking at Jack. 'Where *were* you last night?'

'In the hospital,' Jack says. Soft and sad. 'With my mate.'

To his horror, fresh tears well in Will's eyes, and he tries not to blink so as not to spill them.

'I told Beverly to go to you,' he says. 'Tell you everything she knew…' He swallows a sob, his jaw working hard to repress the mewling whimpers of a distressed Omega. 'Instead, she went looking for evidence…' His gaze lingers on the carved side of Beverly's face… the brain, facial muscles, the side of an eyeball… Sickness rises, hot and sharp, but he chokes it down. 'She m-met the Ripper last night, Jack. She…' Another swallow. Will licks his lips, his vision hazy. 'She will be, um… missing organs…'

A tear trickles down his cheek, soaking into the hair of his beard. Another falls as Will shakes his head, anger making his voice catch in a snarl.

'He *had* to take his trophies.'

Jack grits his teeth, locking his knees to keep from crossing the distance and physically soothing the Omega.

‘Who *is* he, Will?’

I know who he is… I know… But you don’t want to hear it, Jack… You’re not ready.

Will’s throat clicks and he sighs, hanging his head in despair. If he tells Jack the truth, now, he’ll lose him forever.

‘Beverly made her connection to the Ripper,’ he says quietly, blinking away the last of his tears. ‘You have to make your own, Jack.’

Jack doesn’t growl, but he gives Will a look of *deepest* contempt, and allows his mouth to curve into an angry sneer.

‘Then what did I *bring* you here for?’ he demands, his rage so sharp that it renders Will momentarily speechless. Fear snatches his breath and he does nothing to hide the whimper fighting to be heard this time, feeling his eyes flood gold as he tilts his head and bares the side of his neck in submission.

Shock finally gives way to grief, and the pain of it brings fresh tears to his eyes. Will lets them fall, battered inside and out by sadness.

Beverly is dead. She’s gone, and nothing will ever be the same again.

‘To say goodbye.’

***

When he arrives back at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Matthew wheels him to the visitor’s room with the metal dunking cages, rather than returning him to his cell. In a way, he’s glad that he feels too sick to eat, since the other inmates are being fed lunch while he waits, alone, for whoever wants to speak to him.

Dr Chilton limps in at half past one, and takes his time pulling out a folding metal chair. He smells of beef sandwiches and expensive coffee, and there is a relish smear on the handkerchief folded in his lapel.

Nonetheless, he affects an air of sympathy as he leans on the cane between his legs, burgundy eyes fixed on Will’s pinched, tear-stained face. The tears stopped long before Matthew strapped him back into his straightjacket and muzzle, but his lips are still flushed and his eyes bloodshot.

‘Would you like to talk about what happened at the observatory?’ Chilton asks softly. Inviting confidences, as though he can be trusted.

Will doesn’t waste the effort on a growl. Simply denies the Alpha the satisfaction of an emotional response or eye contact. He keeps his gaze fixed on a peeling flake of paint on the door of his cage, and speaks in a flat voice.

‘*You* discussed my therapy with Hannibal Lecter, Frederick. *Counter* to our agreement.’

‘I gave him a peek before I snatched down the shades,’ Chilton replies, sounding wounded.

‘I have appearances to maintain,’ Will says, still speaking in a monotone.

And I don’t want him to know the full extent of my revelation. Not yet.

Chilton sighs, and regards Will with barely concealed hunger.

‘Beverly Katz paid you a visit,’ he says. ‘Before she was murdered. What did the two of you discuss?’

Will scoffs.

‘You weren’t listening to *that* one?’ he bites, and Frederick rolls his eyes, looking away as though irritated by what he is about to admit.

‘You met her in the privacy room,’ he says. ‘It is the only room in the facility I am not legally allowed to monitor.’

‘And you let *that* stop you?’ Will says, not quite able to glare at the Alpha even as he challenges him. In truth he feels beaten, exhausted and very, very fragile after this morning. He feels like a chick without its mother, freshly hatched and alone in the world.

Like a grieving Omega without his Alpha mate to comfort and support him.

Omegas are not built to lead solitary lives.

He doesn’t know whose thought it is. His own or Hannibal’s. It’s becoming more difficult to keep his mind separate from his mate’s.

Will swallows hard, an idea starting to form. He can’t *tell* people the truth, but he can lead them to it… He can give them clues, and watch as they follow the trail right back to Hannibal.

‘We talked about the Chesapeake Ripper,’ he says, his voice wobbling. Whilst not intentional, he can tell from the sudden tightness in Chilton’s shoulders and the sharpness of his scent that it has triggered his urge to protect. Good. Let him. ‘And then she went and found him.’

‘Psychopaths can be indifferent to those sorts of setbacks,’ Chilton says, soft but intense. He is on the trail, now, like a hound. ‘I know something of the monster you are dealing with.’ At Will’s silence, he continues, ‘He is a well-educated man. A socially *competent* man. He has surgical experience or, at the very least, know-how.’

Able to finally meet Frederick’s eyes, Will allows a hint of disdain to color his voice as he replies,

‘You thought *Abel Gideon* was the Chesapeake Ripper.’

Another eye roll. Embarrassment made to look like irritation.

‘Evidently I was wrong about that.’

‘Yeah.’ Will sniffs, and rolls his shoulders. Now for the final piece… ‘Gideon *knows* who the Ripper is…’

‘I suppose you do, too?’ Chilton replies, and Will offers him a grim smile, eyes wandering the ceiling as he says lightly,

‘Wouldn’t it be interesting if we both said it was the same man?’

Chilton smirks, his eyes gleaming.

‘Yes, it would.’

Will hums, nodding slowly.

‘It’s a *shame* we can’t *talk* to Abel Gideon about the Chesapeake Ripper…’ He shrugs, and tips his head in a way that displays the curve of his jaw and his milky throat. ‘Well, just think, Frederick… you could be the one who *catches* him after all…’

How could you ever resists such an offer?

***

Seven metal autopsy tables gleam beneath the harsh fluorescent lights of the BSU morgue. Saul Abrams-Katz lies at one end, looking peaceful now that he’s been cleaned up. It is a courtesy that they have brought him here, to lie beside his Alpha until they can be cremated together.

At the other end, beside the table containing the largest, most recognizable slice of Beverly Katz, Brian Zeller, Jack Crawford and Jimmy Price stand in a moment of silence.

The Betas are pale but grim-faced, their jaws set and hands steady as they steel themselves to examine the remains of their former boss. They are dressed in their white lab coats, buttoned up and clad in blue latex gloves.

Perfectly professional. Ready to do their jobs.

Jack sighs.

‘Beverly *isn’t* your responsibility,’ he says softly. ‘You should be allowed to grieve. You shouldn’t have to wade through it.’

Jimmy swallows sharply and shakes his head at the Alpha.

‘We’re not running away from this, Jack. Beverly wouldn’t.’

‘Good.’ Jack nods, a single, proud purr rumbling in his chest. Zeller turns to him.

‘I double-checked the autopsy report,’ he says, his voice hoarse. ‘What you found at that observatory wasn’t all Beverly.’

Jack frowns.

‘What do you mean?’

‘These kidneys,’ Zeller says, gesturing to the sliced organs on a side table. ‘They were placed inside her body after she was killed. I typed them against DNA samples and they belong to the Mural Killer.’

‘James Gray,’ they all say together, nodding. Jack’s frown deepens.

‘So whoever killed James Gray and sewed him into his mural, also murdered Beverly, swapped out their kidneys…?’

Zeller nods, grimacing at the impossibility of their task.

‘Right now, the only thing we have to go on is we find her kidneys, we find her killer.’

***

After a long and tiring day, Hannibal is looking forward to a well-cooked meal and a nice bottle of wine. Returning to routine will surely soothe him, and help him to sleep tonight. He can feel exhaustion pulling at him, dragging at his muscles, making him weak.

He misses Will. The longer they are separated, the worse he feels. He wants to cook something simple and comforting.

Something Will would like.

Hannibal rolls up his shirtsleeves and ties his apron around his waist. He places Beverly Katz’s kidney onto his wooden chopping board and slices off the fat from around the organ. She had been lean, and had cared for her body. He’s looking forward to tasting her.

He places the kidney into the grinder, turning to wheel to produce mince, which he seasons with dried herbs from the wall garden in his dining room. The meat is rich and dark, and he pats it down into a large patty in the frying pan. Adds a splash of wine, which he burns off in a burst of flame and then allows it to simmer as he prepares the buttery, short-crust pastry.

Sitting alone at his dining table, his mother’s painting of *Leda and the Swan* above the fireplace behind him, Hannibal takes a moment to admire the aesthetic of his dish. The lid is thin and perfectly golden, slanted atop the dish of kidney mince. Red and yellow beets sit beside a rocket garnish to freshen his palate afterwards, and a glass of fruity, lightly spiced Grenache complements the thick, smoky flavors.

Taking a mouthful, Hannibal allows himself a victorious smile. He is an apex predator. The perfect provider, like the Alphas of old. When a fight for survival meant eating one’s enemies.

He hopes, one day, that Will understands him. Accepts him.

Hannibal sighs, and reaches for his drink.

I wish you were here with me, mylimasis. I wish I was cooking for us both.

***

With the lingering echo of meat and wine on his tongue, Will curls around himself on his thin mattress and pulls the rough wool blanket pulled up over his head. Sleep comes quickly because of the sedative he was given with dinner, and Will slides into dreams that twist to nightmares and bleed into memories.

He sees Abigail, planted in a field, bursting with mushrooms, the spores reaching for him. Abigail, smiling at him, her throat slit open as she bleeds to death on the floor of her father's kitchen. Himself, his back flayed, suspended over Hannibal's bed, helpless as he bleeds to death over the wendigo's wide, waiting mouth.

See?

Terror chills him, and Will rubs his arms. He is standing by the window of Hannibal's office, the colors muted and light dull. It's still a dream, but this is built on a memory. Hannibal is behind him, perched on the edge of his desk, no doubt watching with the same intense expression he always wears when listening to Will speak.

As though Will is the most interesting person in the world.

'When you shot Eldon Stammets,' the Alpha asks, 'Who was it that you saw?'

Hannibal's voice is soft in the quiet of his office. Will remembers going to him, seeking sanctuary with him because there was nowhere else he *could* be after he shot the Farmer. He feels the same desperate panic that he'd felt then, the same confusing heat swirling in his belly, but, this time, there is an answering pulse in the crest on the back of his neck.

'I didn't see Hobbs,' he mutters. *I didn't see swarming darkness.*

Will presses a hand to his belly, protecting the shadow inside him. He turns. He wants to go to Hannibal – he's *always* wanted to go to Hannibal – but the wendigo is watching in the corner. Blacker than the shadows, his demon tilts its gaunt head, razor antlers reaching up towards the ceiling, disappearing into the gloom. Empty eyes locking him in place, stealing his strength.

I feel like I'm fading.

No wonder he'd struggled to hold onto himself. Will's vision wavers, and he sees long, skeletal fingers reaching for him.

He's been feeding on me this whole time.

‘Killing him felt *good*,’ Hannibal purrs, and Will’s shadow slithers between his ribs, spilling out into his veins with each thud of his heart.

Yess…

But Will shakes his head. A single jerk. No. *No*. He won’t give in. He can’t.

‘Killing Hobbs felt *just*.’

The demon comes to stand between him and Hannibal, arms out, waiting for him. Hannibal doesn’t acknowledge its presence.

You’ve been hiding your true face from me since we met.

‘You’re supposed to be my paddle,’ Will whispers, and a single tear rolls down his cheek. The wendigo reaches for it, catching the quivering drop on the tip of one claw, and brings it to its thin lips, *just* shy of tasting it.

Will whines, long and low, and takes a step closer.

Alpha…

‘Killing must feel good to God, too,’ Hannibal says softly, half-hidden behind the wendigo. Will can’t look away from the demon’s face, from the hollowness of its cheeks and the sad, *aching* emptiness behind its eyes. He reaches for it, his hand trembling, and presses his palm flat to the jagged bones of its ribs, right where its heart should beat. Where silence greets him, hurting him with what it means.

You froze inside a long time ago. You’re freezing again, the longer we’re apart. But if I come to you… if I meet you in the darkness…

A promise hangs between them, fragile as spun sugar. Something so young and tender that it has yet to form.

Potential.

Will holds his breath, his own heart racing. Battering against his insides as though desperate to escape, to find shelter inside the hollow darkness of his lover.

'Hannibal...'

The room shifts. He’s still touching the wendigo, its emaciated arm coming up to hold his shoulder, but instead of Hannibal’s office, Will sees the cobalt blue of his Alpha’s dining room around them. Abel Gideon sits at the far end of the table, staring past the bowl of ostrich eggs separating him from Hannibal.

‘Are you the man who *claimed* to be the Chesapeake Ripper?’ Hannibal asks, and Gideon frowns in confusion.

‘Why do you say “claimed”?’

The wendigo shifts, tightening its grip on him as Will turns. It wraps a cold arm tight around his body, bringing him back against its chest and enfolding him as they watch the scene play out before them.

At the table, Hannibal narrows his eyes.

‘Because you’re not,’ he replies. ‘You know you’re not, and you don’t know much more about who you are beyond that.’

‘Are *you* the Ripper?’ Gideon asks, and Hannibal’s eyes gleam. He turns to Will, just as he had in the first recollection, his expression filled with… what? Regret? Love…? Pity?

When he speaks, something in his tone makes Will feel sick. Makes him feel split open and hollowed out.

‘A terrible thing… To have your identity taken from you.’

What have you done, Hannibal?

The wendigo’s grip tightens when he starts to struggle, and Will bares his teeth in a snarl. Watches, panic rising in a tide, as the other version of himself whimpers, reaching for his Alpha.

Gideon considers Hannibal for a moment, and then swallows.

‘Well, I’m taking it *back*,’ he says. ‘One piece at a time.’ Hannibal waits, and Gideon smirks. ‘You should see the pieces I got out of *my* psychiatrist.’

‘Hannibal,’ Will calls, fighting against the demon’s grasp. ‘Hannibal!’

‘Alana Bloom was one of your psychiatrists, too,’ Hannibal says lightly, either ignoring Will or unable to hear him. Knowing him, it could be either. ‘Is that right?’

‘Yes… Dr Bloom…’ Gideon purrs, his eyes sparking red with interest. Hannibal nods thoughtfully, and looks over to the Will stood by the fireplace. He holds out a hand, and Will, trapped in the wendigo’s sharp, impossible hold, starts to shake as he watches his Alpha shift his chair back as the other Will falls at him.

Oh God… no, no, Hannibal, please…

‘Hannibal!’

Will watches himself drop to his knees at a touch to his shoulder, and he *knows* he has just buried his face in Hannibal’s lap, sucking up the scent of him, spreading his knees wide when Hannibal nudges his thighs apart.

His heat-mad self might not care that there’s another Alpha watching, but the Will *seeing* it does. He bucks, scratching and biting at the withered arms subduing him, feeling his eyes pulse gold as heat races down his spine and spills boiling slick from between his ass cheeks.

He watches Gideon's eyes widen, as though he can't quite believe what he's seeing. Will chokes on tears at the tell-tale clink of a buckle and the sound of a zipper, and glares through tears as Hannibal's expression remains eerily calm.

Have I only ever been a game to you? Did you ever care about me at all?

'I can tell you where to find her,' Hannibal says, guiding Will to swallow him down, humming in satisfaction. Will can *feel* it through the bond; the thrill of the power, the *control*. He gets off on it. On having Will surrender, *completely*, to him.

I want to taste you again.

Will sinks his teeth into the wendigo's leathery skin but, instead of blood, tar oozes from inside it, stinking of rot. He spits, smearing black spit down his chin. He can *feel* the knot swelling inside his other self's mouth, locking him in place and stretching his jaw as Hannibal's hot seed spills down his throat.

Alpha…

'Hannibal!'

Will jerks awake, drenched in sweat and dizzy from holding his breath. He scrambles to sit up, pressing his back against the cold stone of his cell wall and hugging his knees to his chest as his heart throws itself against his ribs.

It's late; the lights are dim and everyone is quiet. Chemical exhaustion pulls at his eyelids, but he rubs his face, forcing himself to stay awake.

He can't dream about Hannibal again. He can't dream about the wendigo. About his feelings for them both.

Pressing a hand to his racing pulse, Will counts the beats until the tempo slows. Breathes slowly and deeply, waiting for the grey spots to fade from his vision.

Fire churns in his gut, but he refuses to acknowledge the possibility that it could be anything other than rage. That it could be desire, or, even worse, *sympathy*.

I hate you, he thinks, glaring through the gloom at the ghostly white shadow of his sink, listening to the drip of water hitting the basin. *And I will never, ever forgive you.*

***

The next morning, Will is so tired that he stumbles on his way into the visitor's room, held upright only by Matthew's firm grip on his elbow. He steps inside the cage and hears the padlocks click into place before then Matthew removes the cuffs from his wrists so that he can sit.

Frederick works fast when he wants something, and there's another patient already waiting for him. Abel Gideon's scent is dulled by the same scent suppressants Will is forced to take, though the Alpha's hormone blockers have the added effect of removing his ability to go into

rut, rendering him as weak as a Beta. He looks ill; sallow-skinned and thinner than before. Life in maximum-security prison has not been kind to the doctor.

When he sits, Will makes a point of staring straight ahead, giving Abel a good view of the side of his throat and jaw – two of the most favored parts of an Omega's body. He wants him pliant, after all.

'Mr *Graham*,' the Alpha drawls, swiveling on his stool to stare, avidly, at him. 'Always *did* look like the boy next door.' He sniggers. 'Is it *true* you ate that *poor* Hobbs girl?'

Will grimaces at Gideon's crudeness.

'You can call me Will,' he says, still looking towards the double doors leading to the rest of the hospital. 'Now we're of *equal* social standing.'

'Hmm…' Gideon considers him, eyes narrowed. 'Well, *almost* equal,' he says, reminding Will of his lesser rights as an Omega. He sighs. 'Is this Frederick's idea of punishment? Group therapy with the man who tried to kill me…'

'No, I'd like to *talk* to you,' Will says, glancing at Abel from the corner of his eye, careful not to turn. Not yet. 'About the Chesapeake Ripper.'

'Thought *I* was the Chesapeake Ripper,' Gideon replies, and Will doesn't hide his scoff.

'No, you're the *pretender* to the throne,' he replies, his jaw tightening when Gideon purrs.

'What did you *offer* Frederick to bring me back?' he asks, and Will sees enough to know that the Alpha is tilting his head, openly studying him. 'I'm the *last* person *he* wants to see. I give him a visceral chill in the *guts*.' Another snigger. 'Whatever's *left* of them.'

'You *know* who the Chesapeake Ripper is,' Will says, turning to look at him but unable to lift his gold-ringed eyes from Abel's chest. 'You've *met* him.'

Gideon nods slowly.

'So, Frederick gets to catch the Ripper after all… What do *you* get?'

Screwed over, Will thinks, and he can't think of another reply. Gideon's expression softens just a fraction; he's still an Alpha, underneath the drugs and psychosis, and his instincts scream at him to protect Will. To care for the Omega. If Hannibal Lecter is caught, Will is either going to be given a nuchalectomy, risking his sanity and his life as his crest is cut off, or he'll be imprisoned with him… Or they will be kept separate, and left to wither away to nothing without each other.

Either way, there's no happy ending.

Will turns, spreading his legs just slightly, and drapes his arms through the bars of the cage. He sees Gideon's nostrils flare, knowing that his sweet musk has just shifted in the air and drifted tantalizingly close.

‘I *remember* that night at Dr Lecter’s,’ he says quietly. Drawing Abel in. ‘The night I brought you there.’

‘The night you tried to kill me,’ Abel reminds him, and Will growls his frustration.

‘Yes, how do you think I *found* you?’ he demands. ‘He *sent* me to kill you, Abel.’

Dr Gideon is quiet and, for just a moment, Will feels a spark of hope, until the Alpha looks down his nose at him.

‘Am I your *evidence?’* he croons. At the flash of gold in Will’s eyes, he smirks. ‘Oh, you’re in *trouble*, Mr Graham.’

Will ducks his head, hiding his disappointment. The frustration wetting his eyes like some goddamn, pathetic little *Omega*.

‘Why would you *protect* him?’ he whispers, staring at the Alpha. Gideon lifts one shoulder in a dainty shrug.

‘*You* were quite happy to try and kill me yourself,’ he says. He rakes burgundy eyes up and down Will’s body before rising again to settle on his face. ‘You have it *in* you, as they say.’

Turning away, Abel sighs and rolls his shoulders, settling himself down to ignore Will for the remainder of their time together.

‘He is the devil, Mr Graham,’ he says, staring straight ahead, just as Will had done with him. ‘He is smoke. You’ll never *catch* the Ripper. He won’t be caught. If you *want* him…’ He smiles, and purrs again, pushing crimson into his irises as he looks one last time at the Omega. ‘You will have to kill him.’

Can you do that? Kill your own mate? Your own Alpha?

The question hangs, silent, between them, and Will clenches his teeth.

‘Fair enough,’ he says, sinking into the dark warmth of his shadow, recalling Abigail and Beverly. His surrogate daughter and long-term friend. Just two of the many people Hannibal has killed over the years.

He thinks of his own situation; his body ravaged by detox, bonded in a lie and manipulated into thinking he *murdered* and *ate* people. Betrayed by everyone he cares about.

Can he kill him?

Yes.

***

Hannibal does not often engage in daytime drinking, but the persistent headache he has endured since Will’s panic attack the other day, coupled with his current visitor, prompts him to pour two generous brandies from his office supply.

‘You and I are both proponents of unorthodox treatments of the mind,’ he says, glancing up to see Frederick Chilton watching him as he saunters around the room, silver cane in hand. ‘Strategies others might not choose to understand.’

Frederick remains quiet; he is pensive, and stares into the flames of Hannibal’s large fireplace. The room is warm; bordering on uncomfortable, but he has never once visited the Alpha without there being a cheery fire somewhere nearby.

‘What *I’m* trying to understand,’ Hannibal continues, scooping up both glasses of cognac. ‘Is why you would transfer Abel Gideon back to your hospital for the unworried unwell.’

Mostly unworried, at least, he thinks, picturing Will.

Frederick looks up at him, his brows drawn together even as he accepts the offered drink.

‘It was not for selfish reasons,’ he replies, and Hannibal chuckles.

‘Ah, selfishness,’ he muses, studying the amber liquid encased in heavy crystal. ‘The original sin of man, according to Judeo-Christian morality.’

‘We are not talking about *morality* or *ethics* here, *are* we, Dr Lecter?’ Frederick rolls his eyes at him, reminding him of their decidedly *unethical* approach to their respective patients. ‘But rather *concealing* their absence.’

Hannibal swirls his brandy, releasing the aroma as the liquid warms, and then takes a long, slow sip, before sighing.

‘Gideon disemboweled you, Frederick,’ he says. ‘Brave of you, or perhaps *wise*, to keep the evidence of your misdeeds under your own roof.’

‘My misdeeds and yours,’ Chilton says quickly, careful not to look Hannibal in the eye even as he challenges him.

Hannibal tilts his head, considering.

‘Neither of us controls our stories well enough to get anything from exposing the other’s misdeeds,’ he says, conceding the point. He will not threaten Frederick with something so crass. When he looks at Frederick, he finds the smaller Alpha looking at him with something akin to surprise on his face, as though he hadn’t expected Hannibal to relent so easily. His gullible nature is laughable.

‘Here’s to that,’ Frederick says quietly, and lifts his glass to toast to his assumed safety. Hannibal watches him limp away, savoring the scents in his glass again as he watches Frederick struggle to put into words his thoughts and feelings.

‘I brought Gideon back because…’ Chilton wets his lips, choosing his lie carefully. ‘I thought he might be *useful* in Will Graham’s therapy.’ Another pause, and he tastes the air. Hannibal’s scent has not changed; the other Alpha remains calm and alert.

Chilton sighs.

‘He shot Gideon,’ he continues. ‘Yet he has no memory of it.’

Watching Chilton spin his false truth, Hannibal wonders just how much his Omega has confided in the good doctor. And just how much Will remembers… Can he recall that night? In his house…? Does he remember what he *did* in front of Dr Abel Gideon?

‘We know memories, emotions and… even spiritual experiences can be manipulated while under hypnosis,’ he says, approaching slowly. Chilton turns, anger flashing in his dark eyes at the suggestion that he might be influencing Will to remember false memories.

‘I’m trying to set Will on the path to rebuilding his broken brain,’ he snaps. ‘Picking up *your* pieces, as it were.’

Be careful, Frederick.

Hannibal allows him the retort, taking a moment to acknowledge his own flash of temper, quickly cooled beneath the still blackness inside him. Only Will can stir his passion. Make him *feel*.

‘You’ve analyzed my patient,’ he says quietly. ‘Perhaps you’ll allow me to analyze yours?’

Frederick narrows his eyes at Hannibal, watching with a slow, curious smile. Surely, if Hannibal *was* the Chesapeake Ripper, he wouldn’t want Abel Gideon to see his face… Surely he would fear recognition…

Hannibal sees these thoughts flit through Chilton’s mind… Sees his contemplation. His gamble. His *lust* for power and glory. He sees it all, and he knows his request will be granted.

His eyes gleam.

‘I’d like to interview Abel Gideon.’

***

Stepping inside the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Hannibal feels the bond to his Omega like a kick in the gut. Will is close; left down the corridor, down the stairs, at the end of the secure ward… His mate is within his grasp, suffering in his separation, weak in his isolation…

But Hannibal continues straight ahead, removing his coat and placing his keys and cell phone into the reception tray, exchanging them for a laminated visitor’s pass.

Will chose his seclusion, and Hannibal will not be the first to break it.

He drapes the black wool over his arm, keeping his stride steady as he enters the visitor’s room. Abel Gideon stands in the narrow cage before him, hands loose at his sides, skin dull from incarceration and waist soft.

He is a pitiful excuse for an Alpha, and Hannibal feels his own darkness rise within him, purring in anticipation of the hunt. Nonetheless, he comes to a stop at the black line on the

tiled floor, and Abel's mouth twists into what could be considered a smirk.

'You don't need to stand way over *there*,' he drawls. 'I'm a cutter, not a pisser.'

Hannibal steps closer to the cage.

'Hello, Dr Gideon.'

Gideon's watery blue eyes, thinly ringed with red, travel over Hannibal's sharp suit and broad, well-muscled shoulders. There is recognition there, but it is concealed from his features. He remains impassive; coolly dismissive of everyone around him.

'Our brains devote more space to reading the details of faces that *any* other object,' Abel says. A single quirk of the eyebrow. Acknowledgement and surrender in one. 'Dare I say… I've never seen *yours* before.'

Smart man.

Hannibal smiles.

'I'm Dr Hannibal Lecter,' he replies. 'I am Will Graham's mate.'

Gideon's smirk widens.

'Well, *he's* not a very good advertisement for your taste in *men*, Dr Lecter,' he says, and Hannibal feels a growl rumble low inside his chest at the insult to his Omega.

'That remains to be seen,' he says quietly. A warning, and the only one he shall offer. Gideon considers him, eyes narrowed, crooked teeth worrying at his lower lip. He knows he should submit, but he has his Alpha pride, after all.

'*Ohhh*,' he croons, grinning again. 'I beat you're a *devil* at the bridge table.'

Hannibal continues to smile, watching his victim attempt to toy with him.

I'm going to feed you to Will. We'll eat you together.

'It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance,' Gideon adds, and Hannibal inclines his head.

'The pleasure's mine,' he purrs. He can hear the crackle of static – Frederick's monitors. No doubt he is watching and listening to their every move, desperate to know the truth. To know if Will really *is* the mate of the Chesapeake Ripper, or just a madman, lashing out at those closest to him.

'But now I know your name,' Gideon says, 'Of course, I am aware of you by reputation, and I see why Chilton both *reveres* you and *resents* you.' He chuckles. 'Esteem in psychiatric circles still eludes him, yet it clings to *you* like soap to a baby's eyes. He very much wants to *be* you.'

Hannibal's smile continues, and he accepts the complimentary drivel.

‘He should be more careful what he wishes for,’ he says, a plan forming even as he speaks. Inspiration, after all, often strikes from the most inopportune places.

Gideon sneers at him.

‘And *you* should have been more careful with Will Graham,’ he says. ‘That young man has got a bone to pick.’

Hannibal represses the prickle of red in his eyes, refusing to betray his cold anger at Gideon flaunting his conversation with Will.

‘As a therapist and his Alpha, I’m concerned with finding ways of overcoming resistance,’ he replies. ‘*Not* building it up.’

Nobody is coming between us.

Gideon’s scent sharpens with fear at the soft, dangerous tone, but he remains irreverent, and continues to smirk.

‘Well, you built up *something*… Dr Lecter. Got *very* deep inside him, didn’t you?’ The Alpha tilts his head, his eyes sparkling. ‘Tell me… is he a good little *mate?*’ He strokes the bars of the cage suggestively, reminding Hannibal of that night in his house, when Will sank to his knees and took him into his mouth, heedless of the other man’s shocked stare.

‘*Mine* wasn’t,’ Gideon continues, eyes still locked on Hannibal. ‘That’s why I *killed* her. But then, she *was* a Beta… Maybe I should have found myself an Omega, hm? They give you *everything* you want, don’t they?’ His eyes glow, and he presses up against the door. ‘Has he given you everything that you want?’

Hannibal remains silent, watching the animal in front of him. Gideon’s attempts to rile him are tedious, and his shoulders ache with tension.

He wants Will. Wants to see him, smell him, touch him. Wants to hold him in his arms and kiss him. To take him away from this place and never let him leave his side.

My stubborn boy, he thinks, feeling for the edges of his bond with Will and finding sharp rejection from the Omega. *How much better life will be once you surrender to what you really are. To me.*

Sighing, Hannibal inclines his head to the caged Alpha.

‘It was a pleasure to meet you, Dr Gideon,’ he says, a dark promise lingering in his eyes. ‘I hope to see you again soon.’

***

Stepping outside, Hannibal hears the click of the camera shutters before he sees the fiery curls of the reporter, and he sighs in disappointment at her brashness.

‘That was rude, Miss Lounds.’

Freddy smirks, stowing her camera safely back inside her bag.

‘Did you *really* think I was above that sort of thing?’ Glancing up at the other Alpha, she notes the way that he stops to button up his coat, his expression closed and mouth turned down. ‘Hmm… you seem disappointed.’

‘We evolved the ability to communicate disappointment to teach those around us good manners,’ Hannibal replies, raising one eyebrow at her to emphasize his point. Freddy climbs the steps to stand next to him, her hands pushed deep into the pockets of her emerald coat.

‘Well, unfortunately, I did *not* evolve the ability to feel shame.’

‘You should explore that in therapy,’ Hannibal says, long fingers now rising to close the top of his coat. He does not like Miss Lounds, and he wants as many layers between them as possible.

Freddy’s blue eyes glint.

‘I saw a psychiatrist once,’ she reminds him. ‘And it was under false pretenses.’

‘Happy to entertain you for a more genuine conversation,’ Hannibal says, staring straight through her. ‘So. What brings you to the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane?’

‘*I* am interviewing Will Graham,’ Freddy replies. ‘At *his* request… Imagine *that*.’

Hannibal’s darkness swarms his gaze for just a moment, and he imagines tearing into Freddy Lounds, removing her eyes and her lying tongue and replacing them with mirrors, to reflect the truth.

‘I’m trying.’

Freddy sighs, and makes a point of craning her head to look around Hannibal’s shoulder.

‘Gonna let me pass?’

‘Of course.’ Hannibal steps aside, turning to watch as Freddy disappears inside the hospital.

What are you up to, beloved?

***

After checking in and leaving behind her keys and camera, Freddy follows a slim young Alpha through the visitor’s area towards the privacy room, where Will Graham is waiting for her.

‘Do not pass anything but soft paper,’ the Orderly says. ‘No pens, no pencils. Do not accept anything he gives you. Do not let him *touch* you. You do not touch *him*.’ He keys in the code with a vinyl-gloved hand and opens the glass door for her. ‘I’ll be right outside.’

‘I know the drill,’ Freddy says, nodding to him.

Will glances up as Freddy enters the room, his skin crawling as her heavy scent and acrid perfume stain the air.

Freddy dumps her coat on the second chair on her side of the table and stares down at Will, her eyes blazing crimson.

‘It’s good to see you again, Will,’ she says, and then smirks. ‘Oh, let me *rephrase* that. It is good to see you in *here*. Where you *belong*.’

‘Thank you for coming,’ Will says, narrowing gold-ringed eyes at her and grimacing in what he hopes is a passable attempt at a smile.

Freddy stills for a moment, considering him, and then sighs.

‘Why am I here?’ she asks. They both know the dislike is mutual.

‘I have an *admirer*,’ Will replies, feeling his shoulders tense at the acknowledgement. ‘And…’ A bitter laugh. ‘He seems to fit your *demographic*.’

Freddy smiles, and rolls her eyes at the ceiling.

‘My demographic is murderers, and people obsessed with murderers.’

‘I’m talking about the man who killed the bailiff and the judge at my trial,’ Will says, and he smells Freddy’s scent sharpen with interest, even as she nods slowly.

‘Ah.’ She sinks into her chair, glancing at the Orderly waiting outside. Even though he’s not watching them, she has the distinct impression that he is paying very close attention to their conversation. Can he hear them? These rooms are sound-proofed, surely? ‘And you think he’s your admirer?’

‘He killed the bailiff to give me an alibi,’ Will reasons. ‘He killed the judge because he threw that alibi out, so…’ A shrug and a casual tilt of his head, baring his throat and purring, *just* loud enough to be heard.

Freddy nods again, accepting his explanation. The red fades from her eyes and her scent grows sweet, her body responding to Will’s placative gestures and calming pheromones.

‘So, is your admirer crazy?’ she asks, and Will chuckles, rubbing his tingling fingertips together. He pushes more gold into his eyes, dipping his chin to reveal a hint of his crest before looking Freddy straight into his eyes.

‘I don’t think anybody as *careful* as he is *could* be crazy,’ he says. ‘I think he’s different. Maybe a lot of people believe him to be crazy; the reason for *that* is, he hasn’t *let* people understand much about him.’

Freddy narrows her eyes again.

‘But *you* understand him?’

‘Well…’ Smiling, Will imagines Hannibal’s tongue rasping over the swell of his crest, flooding his body with tendrils of fire that raises a blush to his cheeks. Freddy purrs, low and deep, as Will’s musk thickens, and she clasps her gloved hands on the table before her as she leans forwards.

‘Are you trying to *catch* him or *contact* him?’

Will mirrors her gesture, his shackles clinking.

‘I would like to establish a line of communication,’ he says. ‘And your website seems like a good place to do that.’

Freddy nods, pursing her lips as she thinks it over.

‘I could open it up for you,’ she says. ‘Ads, editorials, online chatrooms, monitoring incoming mail… I *could* be discreet.’

And here it comes…

Will swallows.

‘In exchange for?’

‘Exclusive rights to your story,’ Freddy says, immediate and serious. Will watches her; watches the *greed* in her maroon eyes, and he knows he has her.

He sits back, pulling right to the extent of his chains, and opens his palms flat in supplication as he purrs, high and melodic. A uniquely *Omegan* sound, and one that causes Freddy to squirm and lick her lips, her eyes pulsing red.

‘It’s *all* yours, Freddy.’

Nodding again, Freddy regains control of herself and moves briskly, placing the voice recorded on the other side of the table as she crosses her legs.

‘You want to talk to your admirer,’ she says, hitting the red ‘record’ button. ‘We’ll have to send him an invitation.’

***

The next part of Will’s plan comes to light that evening, with a late addition to TattleCrime.com. Sitting in his office after his last patient of the day, Hannibal receives the e-mail notification of a new article on his favorite website. When he opens the page, Miss Lounds begins to speak in a podcast to accompany the wittingly titled, Will Graham: The Mind of a Killer.

‘Sadly, other killers have drawn inspiration from Graham. As he stood trial for his life, one such killer even constructed an ode to Graham’s grisly techniques. Graham believed this man wanted to *help*, even though his motives for that are unclear. He killed people in his name, and he’d like to ask him *why*.’

Staring at the photograph of Will, of his braced and muzzled Omega with gold eyes dancing with black fire, Hannibal's belly swoops and his chest tightens with longing. Will is *so* very handsome, and Freddy's picture captures the raw *danger* of his mate.

He needs him to come home. Soon.

***

Freddy's interview took a long time, taking him past dinnertime, and Will sits in a dunking tank, waiting to be taken back to his cell, his stomach growling as the smell of stewed vegetables and meatloaf wafts through the visitor's hall. Matthew has returned from his break and stands with him, perched on the wide sill with one hand in his pocket.

'Would you like a book, Mr Graham?'

'I have my imagination,' Will replies, glancing upwards as he visualizes the sun filtering down through the wide branches of the bald cypress tree in his grandmother's front yard. It had been the first place he'd really felt *safe*.

Matthew tilts his head, his eyes glinting red in the dim light.

'I read your Tattle Crime interview,' he croons. 'You're a *very* articulate man.'

Will hums, glancing at the Alpha without turning his head. He can feel his pulse in his throat, and he *smell* Matthew's excitement, creating a sharp tang to the other man's scent.

'I agreed with a lot of what you said,' Matthew continues. 'You're right. People don't understand much about me.' He draws closer as he speaks, his eyes flooding crimson, and he adds in a loud whisper, 'Or about you.'

Will looks up at him, his own irises prickling gold, and Matthew grins.

'But at least we understand each other.'

So, it is you.

Will swallows, smelling his own sugary musk sweeten to the point of syrup as excitement makes him tingle.

'There's something we don't *have*,' Matthew says softly, and Will can see it, now; the *emptiness* inside him. The black hole where his soul, his *humanity*, should be. 'Or maybe we just evolved not to need.'

Matthew purrs again, prowling ever closer to the door of his cage, and Will holds himself very still as he tracks his approach.

'You were hiding in the *FBI*,' Matthew says, shaking his head in awed disbelief. 'That's… *talent*. If you hadn't bonded, and gone into Heat, they never would've found you.'

‘You found a great place to hide,’ Will murmurs, glancing up at him. The docile, submissive little Omega; gently impressed by the powerful Alpha before him.

‘Well, you spend time in a mental hospital, you pick up the drill,’ Matthew explains. ‘*You* could pass as an orderly. Get a job doing it when you get out. *If* your Alpha lets you work, that is.’ He grins again, his eyes alight with a strange, mad fire, and whispers, ‘They may never know you were in.’

Will whines, fixing doe-eyes on Matthew’s face.

‘Obviously, you realize Chilton records every word said in here,’ he warns, but Matthew hushes him.

‘Who do you think wired the mics? Or *unwired* the mics, as they currently are.’

Allowing them to talk freely. To do anything. No mics means no cameras.

‘You killed the bailiff during my trial,’ Will says, his neck starting to ache from the way he’s holding his head to look up, and also bare his throat.

‘I thought it would exonerate you,’ Matthew says, shrugging. ‘I had read your file often enough. Easy to recreate your work.’

Not my work, and you didn’t recreate it very well.

Will’s shadow growls at the insult to his Alpha’s prowess, but he clamps down on the indignant feeling and continues to stare at the wiry Orderly.

‘It was… so specific,’ Matthew says, licking his lips. He rolls his eyes. ‘Thought the bailiff was a *bitch* to get on that stag’s head. ‘

Will’s lips curl into a knowing smile – Hannibal is stronger than Matthew; he wouldn’t have struggled to lift Cassie Boyle, and he knows his participation is warming the other Alpha to him.

‘And the judge?’ he asks, but Matthew shakes his head.

‘I killed the bailiff. The judge was… somebody else.’

Keys jingle as he approaches the door, but Will can barely hear them over the sudden thundering of his heart.

Somebody else killed the judge…

It didn’t occur to me to send you an ear.

Before he can slide into the current lapping at his ankles, Will’s attention is drawn back to Matthew’s hands unlocking the padlocks. The door swings open, releasing him into the room, and Will rises, moving slowly and carefully so as not to trigger Matthew’s chase instincts.

The smaller Alpha presses a hand to his mouth, sighing in wonder at the Omega before him. Will purrs, and he sees Matthew quiver, an erection tenting his white trousers. Young as he is, he maintains an admirable amount of control over himself, and Will rewards him by turning away, giving him a peek at the top of his crest and the curve of his buttocks. He smells Matthew's scent grow thick and smoky, and he represses his own urge to shudder and cringe away from the invasive stench.

That's it… Come on. Come on…

'Why are you trying to help me?' he asks softly, even though he already knows the answer.

Behind him, Matthew's voice grows hoarse as his scent glands swell with rut hormones.

'Have you seen the way that smaller birds will mob a hawk on a wire?' he asks. 'You and me, we are *hawks*, Mr Graham.'

'Hawks are solitary,' Will reminds him, and Matthew chuckles.

'And that's their weakness,' he replies, sauntering closer. 'Enough of those smaller birds get together and they chase hawks away.'

Bracing himself, Will puts his hands behind his back for Matthew to cuff him. He clenches his teeth to stifle the hiss of pain as the Alpha's bare skin touches his hands, bringing his skin out in an angry rash, but Matthew's sharp eyes spot it and he hums, pressing his chest up close to Will and rubbing his hardness against his ass, his lips at the curve of Will's shoulder.

'Imagine if the hawks were together,' he says, sliding his left arm tight around Will's waist and hugging him close. 'You wouldn't have to be in pain, anymore.'

Sickness rises, hot and bitter, and Will's vision dances with grey spots at the possessiveness of the touch. He releases a shaky breath, his eyes swimming with tears, and then he leans back against Matthew's body. Drops his head back to rest it on the smaller man's shoulder, baring his throat despite *every* instinct screaming at him to cover it. He writhes in agony when Matthew's right hand comes up to cover his windpipe, blistering the flesh beneath his jaw.

'I know you like me,' Matthew whispers, nuzzling Will's cheek and licking a strip of acid across his chin. 'I like you, too. I want to bond you.'

'I want you to,' Will gasps, tears running from bloodshot eyes even as the lie burns his tongue. He trembles, grinding back against the Alpha's erection, and Matthew's teeth graze his stubble before he's suddenly turned and shoved down onto his knees.

Fuck… fuck…

Will gazes up at the Orderly, his bones shattering into razor shards and his skull on fire as Matthew cups each side of his face, holding him in place. He purrs again, forcing it past the bile stinging his voice-box, and licks at Matthew's thumbs until the Alpha gets the idea and slides two fingers inside the inferno of his mouth.

‘Will…’

Matthew chokes on his name as Will sucks at the digits pumping in and out, working every part of his fingers with his tongue, and then the other man fumbles with his pants, jerking the zipper down to free his hard, dripping cock. Will feels his chest cave in, crushing his heart, and *everything* in him begs him to stop, to run, but he resolutely lowers his head to the offering, eyes streaming as bitter poison chokes him with every inch swallowed.

It’s worth it… God, please… Please let it be worth it… Please…

Matthew’s cock stifles his whimpers, and Will gags as two hands grab fistfuls of his hair, holding him in place as Matthew starts to rock his hips, fucking the back of his mouth. He struggles, jerking on the cuffs keeping his hands behind him, wobbling as he loses his balance. The Alpha keeps him upright, following him whenever he tries to back away, and Will’s stomach cramps as pre-cum oozes from Matthew’s swelling knot.

‘Will… *Will…*’

Matthew comes hard and fast, shooting liquid fire down Will’s throat, and, for just a second, Will is certain he’s going to pass out. His vision shakes and he feels very light, like his bones have melted out of his skin. He feels his jaw crack around the Alpha’s swollen knot, barely able to breathe around the size of it.

It’s not supposed to be in him… Not supposed to be there…

Get out… Get it out!

He wriggles backwards, hissing and spitting as the softening cock slides from between his swollen lips, and Matthew tucks himself away before helping him to his feet, holding his face again.

‘Hey, hey, sssh… It’s okay, it’s okay. That was good; you were really good. Are you okay?’

Will pants, unable to wipe away the string of drool on his chin, forcing himself to nod, to sniff and lick the trickle of cum from the corner of his mouth, even though it’s all he can do to keep from vomiting.

‘Stings,’ he croaks, holding still for Matthew to clean him up. ‘‘Cos you’re not my Alpha yet.’

‘I know,’ Matthew says, petting his hair. ‘But you did it anyway. You want me to be your mate.’

‘Yeah,’ Will manages, and he tilts closer, gulping back the frightened sound threatening to escape him as he presses a tender kiss to Matthew’s lips. ‘Please.’

Matthew grins and groans, his hips swaying forwards again. He presses his forehead to Will’s, heedless of the inflammation spreading across the Omega’s creamy skin.

‘Come on,’ he murmurs. ‘Let’s get you back to your cell.’

They walk in silence, Will using every ounce of strength to keep from fainting, to keep one foot moving in front of the other, and he barely notices the howling of the Betas in his ward.

‘Why did you wanna talk to me?’ Matthew murmurs, pitching his voice low so as not to be overheard by Chilton’s monitors. He can’t unwire these ones. He waves to the guard at the end of the hall and Will’s cell door unlocks with a buzz.

‘I need a favor,’ Will replies, equally quiet. He steps inside, and waits for Matthew to remove the handcuffs, willing his body not to start shaking until he’s alone. For his knees to hold him up until Matthew has gone.

‘I’m always happy to do a favor for my mate,’ Matthew purrs, giving his elbow a squeeze. ‘Just… say the words.’

Flayed alive and boiled from the inside, Will turns to the Alpha, staring deep into Matthew’s burgundy eyes, his own swirling amber and gold as agony sweeps through him. At the very *idea* of it… Of the idea of it not working… Of what is going to happen…

‘I want you to kill Hannibal Lecter.’

***

Sit quietly. Let it pass. Let the pain flow through you. Over you.

Will breathes slowly, refusing to rise from his cot. Matthew has been gone for almost an hour, now.

He hasn’t thrown up his cum, yet.

And he still has his crest.

How long does it take to kill another Alpha? Hannibal did it in less than ten minutes when Tobias challenged him for me.

Water trickles from the sink. Heat chases ice up his spine, settling like the tips of knives on his crest. Will rolls his neck, trying to ease some of the pain. His crest is a mess of throbbing agony; does that mean Hannibal is being attacked, or is it residual pain from giving Matthew a blowjob?

The knives are sharper, now. Digging deeper, piercing his flesh… Will reaches over his shoulder, tracing the swollen ridges of the crest. Something catches… Something spiky…

No…

Legend tells that a wendigo is born after a man kills and consumes the flesh of another… After someone engages in cannibalism. They are cursed with an endless hunger, a *need* that cannot be sated.

Will has eaten Hannibal’s kills. He’s mated to a cannibal… To a monster…

Oh my God…

Wrenching his jumpsuit down, Will scrabbles to get his t-shirt off, reaching back for the antlers growing out of his spine. Razor antlers, twisted and black, perfect for ripping through flesh and gutting his victims.

A wendigo's antlers.

He collapses forwards onto his hands and knees, bucking upwards as his skin splits apart, making room for the horns. His shadow swells, blazing through his veins and filling his muscles with strength. With power.

With *purpose.*

I'm going to kill my Alpha.

He pants, mouth open to suck in as much air as possible, fueling his transformation. His –

'Will?'

Alana's voice cuts through the haze of red and Will comes back to himself with a start. He blinks, struggling to ground himself, shocked by the *pain* in his body.

Where is he? *Who* is he?

He looks up, frowning at the Beta's waiting by the cell bars. Dr Bloom smells worried, and her brows are pulled together into a frown, her blue eyes soft.

'Hi,' she says, offering him a sympathetic smile.

'Hi.' Will wipes his palms dry on his thighs, taking another slow, deep breath through lungs caked with shards of glass.

'I'm sorry to drop in unannounced like this,' Alana says, slipping her hands into the pockets of her royal blue coat. It makes her cheeks look pinker than usual, unless she's blushing. Will finds he doesn't much care which it is, right now.

'What's on your mind, Dr Bloom?'

'You,' Alana says, frowning at him. 'You gave an *interview* to Freddy Lounds. You *despise* Freddy Lounds. It just seemed, well, um…' She falters, smiling at her own awkwardness.

Will raises his eyebrows at her.

'What? Suspicious?'

'And slightly worrying,' Alana agrees, grinning.

You're so blind.

Will hums, his throat unbearably sore.

‘You don’t have to worry about *me*,’ he mutters.

Hannibal, on the other hand…

Alana shifts, her smile fading.

‘I know you feel powerless about what happened to Beverly,’ she says. ‘And you wanna do something about it.’

‘Would that be so bad?’ Will replies, looking up at her with gold-blue eyes. Alana’s frown deepens.

‘Depends on what you’re thinking about *doing*,’ she says. ‘But there’s no solution to grief, Will. It just *is*… Have you let Hannibal visit you? He can *help* you, if you just let –’

‘Beverly died because of me,’ Will interrupts, his vision turning watery as tears well in his eyes again. ‘Because she listened to me.’ He shakes his head, a low growl hanging in the air between them. ‘I’m *not* gonna let that happen again.’

Alana stills, worry sharpening her features as she realizes what he means.

‘Will… what have you done?’

Will swallows, turning away to cover his face and pinch the bridge of his nose. He feels so, *so* fragile, like he’s about to splinter apart at any moment.

‘Just what I had to do,’ he whispers, closing his eyes as tears spill down his cheeks.

I had to… I had to.

***

On her way out of the secure ward, Alana pauses on the stairs to glimpse into the security room, frowning when she sees Dr Abel Gideon on the monitors. The Alpha is being escorted from the shower room by two orderlies, smirking up at the camera as though he knows she is watching.

She starts at the sound of Dr Chilton’s voice from above her.

‘What is it about *you*, Dr Bloom?’ The Alpha descends from his office, swinging his cane with every step. ‘The most sinister neurochemistry in the field cannot help *percolating* in your presence. The interesting ones all fall at your feet.’

Alana narrows her eyes, watching as Frederick comes to a stop two steps above her, maintaining an air of dominance.

‘Will Graham, Abel Gideon… they’re chatty as can be. You are like catnip for killers.’

Alana smiles, her eyes flashing.

‘I see Abel Gideon has returned to the roost,’ she says, nodding to the monitors, where Abel is being moved by a steel rod attached to his shackles.

‘I believe you and I are his only survivors,’ Frederick replies, frowning at the security office. ‘Pulled the tongues out of all the rest.’

‘Pulled more than *that* out of you,’ Alana reminds him, and Frederick shivers at the memory. Now that she has his attention, the Beta continues, ‘Have you noticed anything different about Will since Gideon arrived?’

‘Gideon is here as part of Will’s *therapy*,’ Frederick says. ‘Helping him reclaim his past.’

Alana considers the Alpha for a moment, weighing her options. She sighs.

‘Can I see him?’

***

Fifteen minutes later, Alana stands before Abel Gideon, who is safely encased in one of the narrow cages of the visitor’s room. The monitors crackle in the corners of the ceiling, and the floor smells of bleach, like it’s been freshly mopped.

‘Dr Bloom, you are like a flower blossoming amongst the weeds,’ the Alpha drawls.

‘I’m glad to see you alive, Dr Gideon,’ Alana replies, and Abel shrugs.

‘Well, Mr Graham didn’t do a *particularly* good job of killing me. He was sick and a *very* poor shot.’

‘Good enough shot to get a bullet in you before you put a blade in *me*,’ Alana says, and Abel nods.

‘And for *that*, I am sincerely grateful.’

Alana leans against the back of the chair placed before her, a safe distance from the cage.

‘Been wondering about that night,’ she says. ‘How do you know where I live?’

Abel chuckles, his eyes flickering maroon.

‘I think a little birdie wanted me to kill you,’ he says. ‘Or, a little birdie wanted Mr *Graham* to have reason to kill *me*.’ He looks up at her. ‘Either way, you and I are equally expendable.’

‘You were trying to find the Ripper that night,’ Alana says, steering him back on track. ‘Did you?’

‘I found Will Graham,’ Abel replies, and Alana growls.

‘Will isn’t the Chesapeake Ripper.’

‘Not *yet*,’ Abel murmurs, eyes on the floor. He huffs, and uses the bars of the cage to pull himself to his feet. ‘All the things that make us who we are… What has to happen to make those things change?’ He inspects his nails, sighing again. ‘So much has *happened* to Mr Graham, and you *know* how easily Omegas can be influenced. He is a changed man.’

‘Maybe he’s looking for redemption,’ Alana says, her heart beating very fast in her chest. Abel’s next chuckle carries a lingering rasp of a purr.

‘He’s not looking for *redemption*… But *revenge*. Now *that* is a trinket he could value, *long* after he’s lost all his others.’

Fear makes the fine hairs stand on end across Alana’s arms and neck, and she has to wet her lips before she can speak.

‘He thinks he knows who killed Beverly Katz,’ she whispers.

‘For the courtesy you have always shown me,’ Abel says, ‘I am going to give you a gift. I’m going to give you a chance to save Will from himself.’

Alana stares at him, horror coiling like a serpent in her belly.

‘How?’

Abel shrugs.

‘He is in a biblical place right now, but that rage will pass, and when it *does*, Will Graham will either be a murderer, or he will not. Up to you.’

Alana gulps, her mouth very dry.

‘He’s institutionalized,’ she replies. ‘He’s really in no position to be killing anyone…’

‘Not with his *own* hands,’ Abel says, quirking an eyebrow at her. ‘But if he only had a little birdie, who could whisper murder into a sympathetic ear…’

Alana blinks, and a tear rolls down her cheek at how very *lost* Will is. At how *broken* he is.

‘Who does he want to kill, Doctor?’

***

Evening is the best time to visit his gym, because the pool is empty and the changing rooms are freshly cleaned.

After two nights of fitful dreams, Hannibal is eager to swim lengths, to clear his mind and tire himself out enough for a restful sleep. He is a confident swimmer, with smooth, powerful strokes, and he covers lap after lap.

Tonight, another man joins him. He dives into the pool, carving through the water to catch up with Hannibal. He is an Alpha; even through the cloying tang of chlorine and his own sweat,

Hannibal can smell the unmistakable *tang* of rut hormones. Young and full of bravado.

The smaller Alpha swims fast, pushing himself to race Hannibal. But Hannibal is focused on his own physique, and pays the boy no attention. He reaches the end of the pool, flips and kicks off from the wall again, eager to complete his fiftieth length.

He doesn't notice that the other Alpha is no longer there.

Reaching his starting point, Hannibal hangs onto the tiled edge and pushes his swim goggles up onto his forehead. He is breathing hard, slick with sweat and water, a pleasant hum in his body from working his muscles hard.

There is a hiss of air, muffled in what sounds like a silencer, and then something stings him in the shoulder. Hannibal turns, craning to see the dart below his neck, and stares up in muddled confusion at the young Alpha stood over him. It's the boy… the young man who raced him…

His eyes glow red and his teeth are bared in a wolf's grin, chest heaving and muscles bunched as he works himself into a rutting frenzy.

There's something familiar about him…

Who…?

Before he can finish his thought, darkness seeps into the edges of his vision, the sedative stealing his consciousness. Hannibal grabs for the dart, but his fingers are thick and useless, and the tide pulls out in his head. He scrabbles for the edge of the pool, panicking at the idea that he's going to drown, but it's too late, and he's sinking, slipping beneath the surface of the water.

Will…

***

Alana's fear seeps from her pores to stain the air around her with salt. As she runs the length of the gallery in Hannibal's office, Jack Crawford can imagine her scent trail like a shimmering mist behind her.

'He's not here!' Alana cries, tears splashing onto her blue coat.

'There's nothing in his calendar,' Jack replies, still checking the diary. 'What is it you think Will's done?' His cell rings and he holds up a hand. 'Hold that thought.' Brings the phone to his ear. 'This is Jack Crawford… Yes, thank you.'

Alana quivers, blue eyes flickering as she waits for news.

'We've got a trace on his cellphone,' Jack says, and the Beta sobs in relief, barely half a step behind him as they head for the car.

***

In his cell at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Will feels a cold drain creeping through his bond. His crest *aches*, right down to the core of him, in his *spine*. The top layer of skin is dry, cracking like an old scab, just waiting to be peeled off.

Hannibal is dying.

Sitting quietly, Will tracks the pain spreading through his body. It's so much *worse* than when Matthew touched him. It's in his gut, in his *kidneys*… His wrists are on fire and he's dizzy.

He stares straight ahead, at the grinning skull of his sink.

He can hear water. He can't tell if it's real or in his mind.

Drip… drip.

The sound pounds into his temple like a hammer. Like the throb of a headache, as his Alpha slowly returns to awareness after being drugged.

The next drip is red. It stains the cheap porcelain, spreading pink where it hits the water. Collects into a puddle, waiting to slither down the drain and be flushed away.

Not long, now.

***

'Judas had the decency to hang himself in shame at his betrayal. But…' A crooning laugh, rasping with rut-swelled scent glands in the young Alpha's throat. 'I thought you needed help.'

Hannibal can see, through a curtain of shimmering grey spots, his life draining away, sliding down the tiled floor to the shower grate.

How is this happening to him? *Why* is this happening?

His eyes are so heavy. Sleep beckons, but he *has* to stay awake. He has to. Has to…

The upended bucket rocks and Hannibal grips tight with his bare toes, his calf muscles cramping as he fights to keep his balance. The noose around his neck is tight enough already, and his blood-starved heart is fluttering in his chest as it tries to keep him alive.

His shoulders ache, but the duct tape lashing him to the pole behind him forces his arms out to either side, holding his slashed wrists up so that he can bleed out onto the marble floor.

So that he can choose how he wants to die.

Will…

'Did you know that the phrase "to kick the bucket" came from *exactly* this situation?'

Matthew Brown grins over his shoulder at the dying Alpha, at the grey tinge to his face and bloodshot, crimson eyes. He can see the other man shivering, cold from blood loss and the water drying on his skin in the cool air. Matthew himself has pulled on pants and a jacket, though it's now smeared with his victim's blood.

Maybe he'll give it to Will as a mating gift.

'You could kick it out right now yourself and it'd all be over,' he adds. 'Quicker than bleeding out.'

Hannibal watches from under crimson-tinged bangs as the other Alpha approaches and flicks out the sharp blade of the knife he used to slice open his veins. Manages to recall the shape of his face, the slant of his mouth and the dark, glittering eyes.

'You're a nurse at the hospital,' he slurs, fighting the pull of the endless black. 'You're setting a new standard of care?'

The nurse bends and picks up a gun, inspecting the clip of bullets.

'Will Graham is not what you think,' Hannibal whispers, desperate to protect Will even now. Even in his wretched state. 'He's not a murderer.'

'He is *now*,' Matthew replies, smirking up at Hannibal. He bows with a flourish, his tiger purr echoing in the tiled room. 'By proxy.'

Pain drags at him, and Hannibal makes the mistake of slumping into the noose. He groans, his wrists agony, but it's *nothing* compared to the tightness in his chest, the visceral *ache* at knowing Will, *his* Will, is responsible for this.

'He… asked you to do this?'

'What are mates for?' Matthew says, chuckling at the whimper catching in Hannibal's throat. He paces to the far wall and turns, admiring his handiwork. 'Now, I'm gonna ask you a few yes-or-no questions, while you still have enough blood coursing through your brain to answer them.' Steps up and gazes at his prize. 'You ready?'

Hannibal sways, fighting nausea, and blinks. Once for yes.

'Ready.'

Matthew sinks to a crouch before him, gazing upwards in awe.

'Did you kill that judge?'

Hannibal remains silent, his breathing growing more labored with each passing minute. Matthew grins.

'I can *ask* you yes-or-no questions,' he says. 'You don't have to say a word. And I'll *know* what the answer is. The pupil dilates with specific mental efforts.' He stands, stepping right

up to the edge of the bucket so that he can see into Hannibal's face. 'You dilate, that's a "yes". No dilation equals "no".'

Hannibal glares into his face, defiant even while wounded, and he smells Matthew's scent sharpen with excitement. It has an unpleasant odor to it, like old blood. And, very faintly, Hannibal can smell Will.

He kissed you.

Matthew smiles, leaning in.

'Are you the Chesapeake Ripper?'

Hannibal's pupils widen, black swallowing red, and Matthew feels his heart trip over itself. He purrs again, long and loud, and bares teeth that he has filed into fangs.

'How many times have you watched someone cling onto a life that's not really worth living?' he asks, raising his eyebrows at the old Alpha. 'Eking out a few extra seconds… Wondering *why* they bother.'

Hannibal grunts, struggling against the noose, trying to release the pressure on his jugular.

'I know why,' he manages, his lips tingling and a tear rolling down his cheek. 'Life is precious.'

I'm sorry, Will.

***

The location of Hannibal's cellphone is an expensive health club in downtown Baltimore. Jack and Alana enter the pool hall, running as fast as the slippery fall will allow. They've already checked the gym, and now this room is empty.

That leaves the changing area.

Jack slides his gun free as they near the doors, keeping Alana behind him so that he can protect her. He goes ahead, moving on silent feet as he follows the overwhelming smell of blood.

I can't be too late again… I can't…

***

Matthew holds his arms out, sniggering as he imitates Hannibal's plight.

'The Chesapeake Ripper,' he croons, oblivious to the new erection tenting his pants. 'I wonder what they're gonna call *me*.' Another chuckle. 'Y'know, Alphas used to eat their enemies to take their strength.' He picks up his gun, tapping the bucket with its muzzle. 'Maybe your murders will become *my* murders. I'll be the Chesapeake Ripper, now.'

‘Only if you eat me,’ Hannibal gasps, his eyes fluttering shut even as a familiar figure appears at the end of the room.

Yes… Yes…

Jack takes aim, burgundy eyes locked on the scrawny Alpha holding Dr Lecter hostage.

‘Put your hands where I can see them!’ he growls, watching as the other man continues to turn, one arm still behind his back.

Fear claws at Hannibal’s throat, desperation making him hoarse as he imagines Jack being shot down and killed, his one last chance to survive, gone.

‘He’s got a gun! Jack!’

Jack fires, clipping Matthew in the chest, and the smaller Alpha collapses with a strangled howl. He coughs, fighting a punctured lung, drowning in his own blood, and Hannibal wonders how satisfied he would feel if he wasn’t so close to death himself.

And then Matthew, in his final moments, kicks the bucket out from under Hannibal’s feet, hanging him even as the light fades from his own eyes. Jack sprints for the steps, grabbing at the flailing legs, supporting Hannibal’s weight on his shoulder to keep the other man from suffocating.

‘Hold on, Doctor!’ He hoists him further up, loosening the pressure on his throat. ‘Hold on… hold on.’

He looks up and sees Alana skid to a halt, her face draining of color at the sight of Hannibal’s injuries. There’s no time to comfort her.

‘Get an ambulance!’

***

The chances of surviving major blood drop with each liter lost. Feeling his heart slow, struggling with every beat, Will wonders just how many liters Matthew took.

His crest splits, oozing blood down his back, stinging and throbbing as phantom hands touch him, hold him…

Will can feel a mask over his face… Hear the wail of sirens… He hears Alana crying, begging him not to die. To stay with her.

Stay with me…

But Hannibal is fading. Their room in the memory palace is a shell, empty and cold, and Will turns from it, focusing instead on the blood spilling over the edges of his sink.

Three and a half liters, or four…?

Let him die, he thinks, pressing his hands flat to his churning stomach. *Please… please just let him die... Let me be free.*

Futamono

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal deal with their emotional reactions to Matthew's attack, and, as the Ripper strikes again, Jack grows suspicious of Hannibal's dinner parties. An old Ripper victim is discovered, and a new one created, designed to exonerate Will and bring him home.

Chapter Notes

Hey peeps, gosh, this took so long to write!!! I'm so sorry for the delay! Again, been super busy writing my own book, Hybrid, because it's coming along really nicely and I wanted to get as much done whilst I had the momentum.

So, I hope you enjoy this latest chapter, because it was a BEAST to write. And, as always, apologies for any typos.

Comments are always appreciated and feedback/suggestions etc are more than welcome.

Enjoy! xxx

*** TRIGGER WARNING: Cheating / Infidelity ***

SIX

Futamono

'Okay, okay, I've got another one,' Will says, grinning down into Hannibal's face. 'What's your favorite childhood memory?'

Hannibal chuckles, his heart swelling at the adorably *incessant* questions from his Omega. He gazes up into Will's eyes, into sapphires dipped in gold, and squeezes the firm mounds of his buttocks as the other man straddles him, knotted together after another gentle session of lovemaking.

Will moans softly, bearing down around the thick shaft and flooding his body with waves of fresh heat. *Fuck*... He's hard again already, caught between pleasure and pain as Hannibal keeps him right on the edge of prodrome. Sweat dribbles down the notches of his spine as he

spreads burning palms across the other man's broad chest, supporting himself as he begins to move, oh-so carefully, tugging on the throbbing hardness still trapped inside him.

Hannibal gasps, his irises warming from obsidian to burgundy, a low growl catching in his throat as he rolls his hips in time with Will's motion.

'Finding… *ah*... finding the perfect eggplant… for my little sister,' he manages, earning himself a snorting laugh before Will leans down to kiss him, sharing the taste of the beef cheek and red wine ragù that he'd made for dinner. The "simple" meal to welcome Will home after checking himself out of hospital.

Will cups one side of Hannibal's face, savoring the feel of a day's worth of stubble on his cheek, his pulse thundering in his throat as pleasure swirls up and out from each rub against his prostate.

'That's a weird memory,' he teases, shuddering at a particularly sharp ache in his balls, wishing he could crawl out of his skin and climb inside the cavity of his Alpha's chest, to be cradled, safe forever, alongside his beating heart.

Hannibal slides his fingers through Will's hair, playing with the soft, dense curls.

'She loved the color,' he explains. 'And whenever Nanny bathed her in the garden, she would always reach for them… I found the best one for her, and she carried it with her for *days*.'

Will swallows, tears pricking his eyes, and leans down to capture Hannibal's glistening lips in another searing kiss. The spiraling tug of prodrome is easier to fight now; he wants to keep himself *here*, with his Alpha. To keep making love to Hannibal, even as the snow starts to fall outside and the night slips closer to morning.

He wants to be with him, like this, forever.

'I wish I could've met her,' he whispers, pressing their sticky foreheads together, forcing himself to move slowly, to make a circle with his hips that has him groaning and his lips parting at the *sweetness* of the fire licking his insides.

'You'd have loved her,' Hannibal replies, his eyes glowing with such fierce pride that it's like a physical punch in Will's chest. He can *feel* the love his mate still holds for his sister, overwhelming through their bond, and his heart stumbles over itself before tripping double time. He whines softly, stroking every part of Hannibal's chest, neck and shoulders that he can reach, shaking from the maelstrom of emotions crashing back and forth between them.

'I would,' he promises, sucking at Hannibal's lower lip and then kissing the swollen flesh. 'I would, I *would*…' He shudders again, moving faster now, chasing the razor-edged climax boiling inside him, eyes watering at how intense it is. '*God*, fuck… *Hannibal*...'

'I'm here,' Hannibal breathes, massaging the sweat into Will's back before cupping the base of his head and holding him impossibly close, sharing breath as they break together, tumbling over the edge into spiraling gold, no longer sure where one ends and the other begins. 'I'm here, I'm here… *Mylimasis*... Beloved…'

‘*Hannibal*…’

‘Come for me,’ Hannibal gasps, thighs shaking as he bucks up into the spasming channel of Will’s body, spilling another trickle of seed into the pulsing heat, even as Will shoots thick string of pearly white over their chests. He forgets to breathe as Will clenches, and his mind fills with white sparks as he shares Will’s orgasm with him, holding him suspended above an endless pit of black hunger, the insatiable need to mate and fuck and *breed*, until he plants a life deep inside him.

Dizzy, Will falls against his Alpha, panting hard and laughing at how *good* that felt, how *right* and *pure* and *clean* and…

‘*Fuck*… I *love* being mated to you,’ he groans.

Hannibal purrs, long and low, his chest rattling with it, and hugs Will close to him, heedless of the sweat and seed smearing between them. Kisses a damp temple and nuzzles Will’s hair, basking in the sugary, smoky smell of him.

His mate. *His* Omega.

His love.

‘Her name was Mischa,’ he murmurs, speaking into Will’s skin. ‘She hadn’t presented as such, but I’m certain she was Omega, as strong and beautiful as you…’ He sighs. ‘I’ve never told anyone else about her.’

Will shifts nearer, trailing kisses across Hannibal’s jaw, his mouth watering at the smell of the scent near the swollen gland in his Alpha’s throat. If he could just *taste* it…

Hannibal shifts, guiding Will to lie down on top of him, and pets his hair when he obeys. He begins to hum a nursery rhyme under his breath, something foreign, and Will closes his eyes, sleep lapping at the edges of his consciousness, inviting him to drift into blissful nothingness.

It’s quiet here, now…

The memory shifts and water drips. Will flinches, cold pain stealing through the bond to chill his bones. His wrists hurt…

When he pulls away, looking down at the arms he cradles to his chest, he sees the rough, dark lines of stitches. He remembers them as if they’re *his* wounds, but they’re not.

Matthew’s knife cut deep…

This is Hannibal’s nightmare.

Pulling himself away, Will finds himself drifting somewhere between waking and dreaming. He’s dressed again in his prison jumpsuit, stood at the end of a hospital bed and staring down into his Alpha’s ashen face.

Hannibal's blond hair is crusted with old blood, and Will has a stabbing urge to brush it away from his forehead. Seeing him like this, strapped to a ventilator and wired up to monitors, with bags of blood and saline fluid flowing into him, saving him, keeping him alive…

His stomach twists, and Will breathes slowly, clenching his teeth to keep the howl perched on his tongue from slipping free.

Alpha…

A familiar scent catches his attention, saving him before it becomes too much. Caramel and roses… Summer evenings before the world went to shit… It's faint, an echo of the real thing, but unmistakable, and Will turns, light as air, to see Alana dozing in the chair by Hannibal's bed. The Beta holds his Alpha's hand, careful of the butterfly IV, the gesture *so* familiar, *so* reminiscent of the way Hannibal held Abigail after her attack that Will can't help but bare his teeth in a silent snarl.

He's my mate, not yours.

Stalking further around the other side of the bed, he leans down towards Hannibal's face, close enough that he can see the gold eyelashes against his pale cheek. He reaches out, his finger hovering *just* above the papery, blood-starved skin, and begins to sing the same old nursery rhyme that Hannibal hummed to him whenever he was resting.

'Ein Männlein steht im Walde ganz, still und stumm. Es hat von lauter Purpur ein Mäntlein um.'

Brushing his lips across Hannibal's cheekbone, careful of the ventilator, Will watches as tears fall from his eyes, disappearing before they land on his Alpha's gown.

I'm not really here… But I can feel you. And you feel me.

'You stubborn, strong *bastard,*' he growls, swirling emotions battering him from the inside. Rage and fear, revulsion and awe… A dozen conflicting feelings leading to an overwhelming state of ambivalence for his mate.

His mate.

He slides a fingertip over the patch of silky skin on Hannibal's throat, right where his scent gland lies hidden, where it will swell during a rut.

Where Will is going to *bite* him the first chance he gets.

'No more games, Hannibal,' he whispers, surrendering to the urge to kiss his Alpha's forehead. 'I *know* what you are. I know *who* you are. You owe me the truth, and the chance to fight you myself. I'm waiting, *mylimasis.*'

Come and get me.

***

In ancient times, there were three stages to the Alpha-Omega Hunt. The Rut, where an Alpha had to kill any rivals and prove the right to breed. The Chase, to capture the Omega of choice. And the Fight. Frowned upon in modern culture for being too violent and "inappropriate" for weak, delicate little Omegas, it had fallen out of fashion in most countries. Especially America.

The Fight was the Omega's chance to reject the Alpha's claim, to test their worth as a mate and equal, and, most importantly, to bond them in return. A Double Bond, the strongest and most indestructible pairing between two mates, resulted in a crest for the Omega on the back of their neck, and a matching scar, barely thicker than a vein, down the front of the Alpha's throat. Right over their primary scent gland, at their most vulnerable point.

Holding his panting, squirming Omega in his arms, Hannibal feels his scent gland throb and swell beneath the collar of his shirt. Will can smell it; his lips part and he drags the rich, musky Alpha scent over his tongue, sucking it onto the roof of his mouth. He bares his teeth and snaps at Hannibal's jaw, wild-eyed and fierce, steaming in the night air as snow drifts down on the woods surrounding the Wolf Trap farmland.

His Omega is utter perfection, and, if anyone were to Double Bond him, Hannibal would want it to be Will Graham. But Will is not ready. And neither is Hannibal.

He holds him up, supporting his shaking body as Will fights to both escape and throw himself at his Alpha. Stares deep into honey-gold eyes, at the pupils fixed even in the darkness, before cupping each side of his mate's face and rubbing the bristles of Will's beard against his palms.

Will whimpers, a broken, heart-wrenching little sound, and Hannibal's throat swells around a purr. When his speaks, his voice is hoarse with excitement.

'I want you to run.'

Come and get me.

A shot fires somewhere in the dark. Crows caw and take to the air, shattering the scene. Memory slides into dream and Hannibal spins, his heart thundering in his chest, just as Will bolts for freedom. Instead of the strangled howl of a fleeing Omega, the freezing air echoes with the shrill cry of a child.

Mischa…

Turning circles, Hannibal scans the woods, squinting to see anything amongst the shadows. Where is he? *When* is he?

His throat is tightening. It's getting colder…

Too cold…

His wrists hurt…

'Will!'

He starts to run, staggering through snowdrifts, his arms throbbing and heart fluttering, holding tight to the chain noose trailing from his neck so as not to strangle himself. The trees rise straight around him, black as demons in the moonlight.

I know this place…

A light flickers in the distance, calling to him, and the relief is so sweet that Hannibal sobs a laugh, even as he falls to his knees. It's Will's farmhouse, nestled in a clearing overlooked by the skeleton of a bomber pilot, stuck forever in his crashed plane.

The farmhouse… His childhood hunting lodge… It's all begun to blur…

Hannibal crawls closer, soaked through with snow and shaking with cold, his face numb and teeth chattering. He lurches to his feet on the porch and smears blood on the panes of glass as he pushes his way inside, ignoring every instinct screaming at him to turn and run…

'Welcome back,' Will says, grinning up at him.

Hannibal groans, shivering at the bone-deep chill freezing him alive. His arms hurt because they've been sliced open, and his shoulders are on fire because he's strapped to a pole, suspended in a crucifix with a rope noose strung up to the ceiling and his bare feet gripping onto the sharp edges of an upended bucket, balanced between life and death even as his heart pumps his blood down the drain.

Will stands to the side of the shower room, wearing the same dark sweatpants and crimson-smeared jacket that Matthew had worn. The Omega has a strange, mad light in his amber eyes, and, as Hannibal watches, he brings a hunting knife to his lips, lapping blood from the blade and moaning at the taste.

'We eat or die, *Doctor*,' Will purrs, his eyes deepening to red. Alpha red… Another manic grin. 'Now… sing for me,' he whispers, conducting with the knife. 'Sing for *Mischa.'*

His features ripple, twisting and contorting, as if another man is pushing his way out of his skin. A man with crooked teeth, the canines filed into fangs and still clinging to scraps of human flesh… A milky eye and a scar, puckered and raw-looking where it pulls on his upper lip…

Hannibal shudders, desperate to back away as Will advances, holding the knife out.

'Sing for your supper, little master,' his mate hisses, and then he lunges, stabbing him in the throat.

Hannibal jerks awake, weak with fear and soaked in cold sweat. He sucks in a whistling breath, flinching at the blip of monitors around him, the clatter of wheels in the corridor outside and the rasp of skin against his, fingers touching his, tapping his shoulder to get his attention. To ground him…

Will… Will…

There's a brush of golden light against his mind, tinged red with concern, and a soothing brush of imaginary fingers across his chin, slowing his racing heart and giving him the strength to force his eyes to settle on the tiled ceiling above him.

Hannibal…

'Hannibal?'

A woman's voice draws his attention, grounding him in the present, and Hannibal's stomach clenches when he realizes it's not Will watching over him, but Alana.

'It's alright. You're safe.'

The Beta smiles down at him, stroking back and forth over his shoulder to comfort him. Hannibal tracks the resumption of his typical heartrate and then smiles up at her, offering her a self-deprecating grimace at his own melodramatics.

'Welcome back,' Alana whispers, wiping a tear from her cheek. By the lingering stink of chlorine and stale perfume on her rumpled clothes, Hannibal estimates that she's been here in for at least thirty hours.

He swallows, wincing at the swelling in his throat. Some is from the noose snapping taut, certainly, but he's been intubated. Put on a ventilator and kept unconscious as the surgeons fixed the damage to his arms and restored his blood supply.

Memories of the attack come back to him, blurred and then sharp, and then blurred again.

Swimming lengths… Shot with a tranquilizer dart… Waking up, strapped to a pole. Sliced open to bleed out… Balanced on a bucket and given the choice of how to die. Taunted by a young boy of an Alpha… A maniac with a crush on Will Graham…

Will sent him to kill me…

Hannibal's heart skips a beat, and his ribs press down uncomfortably tight.

He knows… Will knows I killed Beverly… And he's angry…

He feels… Regret. Will is a broken teacup, shattered by his experiences, and some of the pieces are sharp.

They will forever be stained by the blood they have spilled.

Cold touches his lips, and Hannibal returns his attention to Alana, who holds out an ice chip so that he can wet his mouth. A gentle caress pulls at him, though, and Hannibal can't help but glance towards the empty space to his left. He can smell sugary musk, vanilla and something wild… Something dangerous…

Will…?

‘How do you feel?’ Alana asks, setting the plastic cup aside and holding his arm again. She means it to be soothing, but the foreign touch is irritating, and the only reason Hannibal tolerates it is because of Will’s reaction. He can feel his mate’s presence, hovering at the edges of his mind. His Omega is conflicted, beautifully wracked with a dozen conflicting emotions. Remorse, satisfaction, anger and sympathy, each one carving out their own place inside him even as he lingers on the fringe of Hannibal’s awareness.

Watching over him. Comforting him in his time of need.

Hannibal smiles, and reaches through the bond to imitate gripping Will by the back of his neck.

You’re still mine, Will. You still love me. No matter how much you hate what I’ve done. What I’m going to do. You’re mine.

‘Alive,’ he whispers, squeezing Alana’s fingers. ‘I feel alive.’

***

Fuck…

Feeling Hannibal’s hand on his neck, even imaginary, robs him of what little strength he has left, and reduces him to a quivering mess of sweat and slick.

Will curls around himself on his cot, gasping for breath and scratching at the stinging, scabbed crest on his nape, torn between wishing he had the courage to just rip it off him, and desperate to protect it from further damage.

I never should have comforted you, he thinks, glaring at his mind’s eye image of the resting Alpha. Of the Chesapeake Ripper, drifting back to sleep, safe and sound. A slumbering dragon, dangerous and insatiable.

Does he hate him? Yes.

Do I still love him?

Will grinds the heels of his palms into his eyes, hard enough to scatter bright spots over his eyelids, and rolls over to face the wall, trying to hide from his ceaseless thoughts.

God, he feels *sick* with it.

Come and get me… How stupid could I have been? Playing chicken with the Chesapeake fucking Ripper?

He wonders which part of him Hannibal is going to eat first. His heart? His kidneys?

He’s always been fascinated with my mind… Can you eat human brains?

Retching and mewling into his knuckles, Will tries to distract himself from images of Hannibal cutting into him while he’s still alive – *he’d kill me first, surely?* – and his mind

slips to the image of Alana, instead.

She'd ridden with Hannibal in the ambulance. Stayed with him all night… Comforted him…

She'd never looked at Will the way she'd looked at Hannibal.

She's in love with him…

To his horror, the thought that Hannibal might *cheat* on him is somehow worse than the idea of him *eating* him, and Will finds himself wishing he could go back to the scenario where he's being carved up by his Alpha.

But, try as he might, he can't shake the vision of Alana stroking Hannibal's arm… His shoulder. The arm Hannibal had used to hold Will close to him when they'd made love… Before it was all about Heat-mad fucking and trying to sate the need to plant a baby inside him.

His breath wobbles as he sighs, and Will sits up, wiping his face on the sleeves of his jumpsuit.

He wouldn't… Hannibal wouldn't do that to me… I'm his mate… He wouldn't…

He wouldn't…

***

The ebony harpsichord in his entrance hall has been in the Lecter family for centuries, and is one of Hannibal's most treasured possessions. Inlaid with silver swans, their family bird, it is strung with gut and polished every weekend to maintain the shine of its lacquer.

Hannibal strokes over the yellowing ivory keys as he plays, his fingers still stiff as he works the tendons and stitched muscles in his damaged arms. Playing is an excellent form of physiotherapy, and he is recovering well; three days out of hospital, five since the attack, and already able to hold a pen and use a knife again, as well as compose a new piece of music.

I'll be back to myself in no time.

The thought doesn't hold quite the conviction that it did before. Tiredness drags at him, and Hannibal finds that the music coming from him is dark and melancholic. Filled with longing, and lingering with the bitter sense of betrayal.

Murder by proxy…

Pausing, he leans forward to add the next note to the sheet before him. No doubt Will is suffering in silence; even now, he refuses to ask for his Alpha, refuses to call for Hannibal through their bond or acknowledge him in any way. Not since that first night in the hospital, when Hannibal had woken from the nightmare.

The isolation is fast becoming unbearable.

Perhaps Jack, when he visits Will tomorrow, can change his mind.

Turning his wrist, Hannibal rubs the pad of his thumb over the rough edges of the stitches. The emergency room surgeon did not have his finesse, but Hannibal is in no shape to neaten the sutures. He sighs, fiddling with the sharp nubs, and considers his emotional response to the attack.

Will's attack.

His mate is fierce, and unpredictable. Two of the things that Hannibal greatly admires about him. He is also impulsive, and ruled by his emotions. He is capable of great violence, even when the knife is wielded by someone else.

I know what you are…

Hannibal sighs, and returns to the keys.

He's going to have to face his Omega sooner or later…

For once in his life, he is unsure whether he is feeling excited or nervous by the prospect.

***

How long has it been since Matthew tried to kill Hannibal? Will's so tired, he can't even remember.

Hunched in a dunking tank of the visitor's room at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, he blinks gritty eyes and feels the pain in his head throb in time to his pulse. His crest hurts and his kidneys ache. He's even stopped shitting properly, though that's probably due to the poor quality of the food…

Try as he might, he can't stay asleep.

Hannibal can't, either. They're both suffering, and they're both refusing to call for each other.

The door opens, and steady footfalls sound on the tiled floor. A thick, rich Alpha musk announces Jack's presence, and Will stands, watching warily as the other man approaches him.

'You're moving smoothly and slowly, Jack,' he says, trying not to imagine an approaching shark. Jack's dark eyes glitter with barely concealed fury, and Will feels a shiver crawl up his spine, settling like a lead weight on his neck, encouraging him to tilt his throat in submission. 'Carrying your concentration like a brimming cup.'

'Hannibal Lecter was almost murdered,' Jack replies, circling the cage in which the Omega stands. 'By an employee of this hospital.'

Matthew.

‘An attendant,’ he continues, narrowing his eyes at the puffy, sore-looking crest on the back of Will’s neck. ‘Who *we* believe is the person that killed the bailiff and the judge at your murder trial.’

‘He killed the bailiff,’ Will replies, not bothering to turn around to face Jack. It’s a classic interrogation technique, and not something he intends to engage with. ‘He didn’t kill the judge. That was –’ *My Alpha. Hannibal. My mate.* ‘The Chesapeake Ripper.’

‘You know this?’

Jack prowls closer before he realizes what he’s doing, and then backs up as Will replies,

‘He told me.’

‘And then *you* told him to kill Hannibal,’ Jack says, still moving. ‘A gift for a future mate.’

Will swings his head around, his eyes flashing gold.

‘*Nothing* I said made that *happen*, Jack.’ He bites his tongue, repressing his anger, and shrugs. ‘It just happened.’

‘”It just *happened?”*” Jack pauses, staring at him with open revulsion. ‘He’s your *Alpha*, Will… You don’t seem to be too broken up about it.’

Will sniffs a laugh and rolls his eyes at Jack’s anger. He’s still pacing, but it’s erratic, now. He alternates between a tight in front of him and a wide, slow lap of the cage, glaring at him the entire time.

‘There’s a common emotion we all recognize and have not yet *named*,’ Will says, his shoulders slowly turning to stone. ‘The *happy* anticipation of being able to feel *contempt*.’

‘You feel *contempt* for Hannibal?’ Jack asks, narrowing his eyes.

The question sits uncomfortably with Will, and he shakes it off like a buzzing fly.

‘Well, I have contempt for the *Ripper*,’ he says. ‘I have *contempt* for what he does.’

It’s a safer answer, but not the whole truth. The contempt he’s anticipating is also for Jack and Alana, and everyone else his mate is playing with right now… Contempt for Matthew, for thinking he could kill Hannibal… For thinking he could really take down the Chesapeake Ripper…

I really do have the strongest, most powerful Alpha…

‘And what does *he* do?’

Jack’s voice draws him back from his dangerously wandering thoughts, and Will blinks to clear the haze from his vision.

‘What does he do?’ he echoes, taking a deep breath as he tries to think of the best way to lead Jack to the answer. ‘What is the first and principal thing he does? What *need* does he serve by killing?’

Jack’s circle brings him back into view and he shrugs, gesturing to the air around him with his free hand as the other clenches into a fist in his pocket.

‘He harvests organs.’

‘*No*, that’s only the *action* of what he does,’ Will replies, forcing his own fists to remain by his sides. ‘Why does he *need* to do it?’

It’s the basic principle of a psychological profile, Jack. How have we missed it all this time?

Jack begins to pace backwards, now, tempting Will to turn with him. To regain control of the situation.

Will ignores him.

‘The Ripper kills in sounders of three or four in quick order,’ he continues. Glances up at the Alpha with big, doe-eyes, tempering his frustration at his arrogance with typical Omegan submissiveness. ‘Do you know why? I know why.’

Jack growls, long and low, and eventually gives up his pacing to plant his feet and face Will.

‘Then *tell* me.’

Will’s upper lip curls in a sneer.

‘Because if he waits too long, then the meat spoils.’

‘He’s eating them?’ Jack raises his eyebrows, disbelief etched into every line of his face. ‘*Hannibal* is like Garrett Jacob Hobbs? A cannibal?’

Has a nice ring to it, Will thinks, barely resisting the urge to roll his eyes again. He knows what Jack’s thinking – Will pseudo-bonded to one cannibal, maybe he’s just imagining the same thing with his real Alpha.

He shakes his head.

‘No, *not* like Garrett Jacob Hobbs,’ he says. ‘Hobbs ate his victims to *honor* them. The Ripper eats his victims because they’re no better to him than *pigs*.’

He’s a psychopath, Jack. And he’s the ultimate killer. The ultimate provider…

Jack sighs.

‘With the exception of Beverly Katz, there is no connection between Hannibal and any Ripper victims.’

Will huffs, shaking his head before Jack's even finished.

'No *immediate* connection,' he corrects.

Jack begins to pace again, too agitated to remain still for long. His eyes glow like hot coals in the gloom of the visitor's hall, and he wears his incredulity with pride.

'Hannibal Lecter is *not* the Chesapeake Ripper,' he snarls. 'He's your *mate*, Will.'

Will laughs at the mesh ceiling of his cage, exasperation bubbling up to stab at his chest.

'If the Ripper's killing, you can *bet* Hannibal Lecter's throwing a dinner party,' he snaps. 'You and *I* probably sipped *wine* while *swallowing* the people to whom we were trying to give justice, Jack!'

Bile scratches his throat again and he clenches his jaw, fighting down the near-constant urge to vomit. He sees new revulsion on Jack's face, but there's a hint, a *hint* now, of something else…

Doubt…

Jack has doubts…

Now.

Will sighs, and then tilts his head at the Alpha, a low whine catching in his throat as he thinks of Beverly. Of her frozen slices and dead Omegan mate. Two graves, side by side but never able to touch again…

He laces his tone with just enough derision that Jack won't see the manipulation, allowing himself a moment of scorn for his former boss.

'Who does he have to *kill* before you open your eyes?'

***

Alana Bloom's smile is as soft and sweet as her scent, and Hannibal takes a moment to indulge in the soothing aesthetic of her before returning his attention to the sharp knife in his hands.

'A remarkably lean organ, the heart,' he says, slicing through the flesh of it as he speaks. 'Yet such a *potent* symbol of life… And the things that make us human. Good and bad… Love and ache…'

Another carve, ensuring that each piece is the same. He can feel Alana's eyes on him, bright with the same protective anger she used to feel for Will. She's barely left his side since the attack, and Hannibal can *smell* the desire rising within her, growing stronger with every passing hour. She believes that his relationship with Will is over – too broken to be salvaged. She, after all, gave up on the Omega weeks ago.

Perhaps she never truly believed in him in the first place.

‘All of them skewered?’ Alana asks, smiling down at the metal rod between her hands. As Hannibal’s sous chef, she is responsible for alternating chunks of juicy red bell peppers with heart ready for seasoning and grilling.

Hannibal sighs, and considers the heart between his hands. His own still hurts at the thought of what Will did to him, and his left hand will never be as strong as it was, thanks to a nick in the tendon. His recovery is hampered, as well, by his separation from his mate – his Omega’s saliva would vastly increase the speed and success of his healing, but Will still has not called for him, even after Jack’s visit, and Hannibal will not be the one to ask.

‘It’s a *thematic* dish,’ he admits, placing another piece of meat on her board and watching the color rise in Alana’s cheeks as her scent thickens. His own lips twist unhappily. ‘My heart certainly feels skewered.’

‘You have the scars to prove it,’ Alana says quietly, and Hannibal considers the row of ugly stitches on his left forearm. He sighs again, choosing to divulge a little of his fear to better manipulate Alana’s growing attraction for him. After all, it may prove useful, given the spark of hope he felt from Will following Jack’s visit.

His Omega’s mind has been remarkably open to him since the attack, as though the last of Will’s defenses crumbled when he decided to embrace his darkness and use it to hurt, to *kill*. Hannibal *knows* that Will has planted a seed of doubt in Jack’s mind.

As disappointing as it is, it was only a matter of time before Jack Crawford’s loyalty needed to be tested.

‘It feels as if that noose is still around my neck,’ Hannibal says, keeping his eyes lowered. ‘It’s strange having nightmares,’ he murmurs, his knife paused midway through another cut. ‘I never used to.’

‘Well, don’t make the same mistake I’ve made,’ Alana says, raising her eyebrows at her past self. At Hannibal’s questioning look, she glances up at him from under her eyelashes and smiles coyly. ‘Being your own psychiatrist.’ She adds another piece of heart to the skewer as she continues, ‘I’m always assessing my feelings instead of *acting* on them.’

Hannibal smiles, thinking of her near-miss with his mate. Will had given Alana so many chances, and she had squandered each and every one until it was too late.

I will not squander my chances with him, no matter how difficult our paths have become.

‘It’s the safest course,’ he murmurs, ensuring that his wording, tone and body language is subtle enough that, if she wants to, Alana can choose to ignore the suggestion of regret in his voice.

As predicted, Alana glances down, shifting a fraction closer as though pulled towards Hannibal by an unseen force.

She heard the regret, because she *wanted* it to be there.

‘You have to find a way to deal with what happened to you,’ she says, keeping her eyes fixed on the sharp object in her hands. The rest remains unsaid. *She* has to find a way to deal with how she feels about him.

Hannibal returns to his preparation.

‘I’m metabolizing the experience by composing a new piece of music.’

Alana chuckles, rolling her eyes at his coping mechanism. Only *Hannibal* would turn a near-death experience into a musical score.

‘Harpsichord or Theremin?’ she teases, and Hannibal indulges her, dipping his head closer with a grin.

‘Harpsichord.’

There’s a pause between them, the silence filled with the soft notes of Mendelssohn’s *Songs without Words* playing in the background, and then Hannibal continues,

‘Stravinsky said “a true composer thinks about his unfinished work the whole time. He’s not always *conscious* of this, he’s aware of it, when he suddenly knows what to do”.’

I’m hoping that I suddenly know what to do with Will… He is my ultimate work.

Alana hums, considering him with gentle pity. If she weren’t such a good friend, he might have to find a better use for those insulting eyeballs.

‘And do you know what to do?’ the Beta asks softly.

Hannibal’s darkness purrs, coiling between his ribs like a snake to swell and throb in time to his beating heart, radiating out with a deep and endless hunger.

Oh, he knows *exactly* what he needs to do. *And* who he needs to do it with. But, until Will is ready to join him…

He smiles.

‘I need to get my appetite back.’

***

Revenge has long been considered a dish best-served cold, and, after so many nights feeling helpless, waking in a cold sweat from memories of pinching fingers and rotten teeth filed into fangs, Hannibal finds himself feeling thoroughly *rejuvenated* after creating his next tableau.

He hopes that, when Will sees it through their bond, his mate truly understands the message. So many words can be spoken in the silence of a single flower, be it a withered stem or a silky peony.

For Will, only a masterpiece will suffice, and that is exactly what Hannibal has given him.

Sheldon Isley rises from the trunk of one of the very trees he was responsible for cutting down, his torso opened and inlaid with a careful arrangement of flowers, placed in the middle of the concrete obscenity on which he built his success.

The message hidden within the flowers is clear to anyone fluent in Victorian floriography. Because Hannibal is, so too is Will.

It has taken days to prepare, but the effect is dramatic, and has given Hannibal's arms another week to heal. Given him another week to put the pieces in place for the next part of his game.

I'm coming for you Will… Just as soon as Jack comes for me.

***

Initial reports of the Tree Man are sketchy – an early morning commuter parking his SUV in the lot assumes it's a teenaged prank and calls the council to complain. Then another, saying that there's a tree stump blocking several spaces.

It's only after the fifth call that an officer goes out to check, and then they realize that there's a body, too.

The FBI are called, and field agents head over in a blaze of flashing lights and wailing sirens.

Jack's team are already reviewing the scene when he arrives, though, to his surprise, the body has not yet been removed from the tree and placed on the coroner's stretcher. In fact, Price and Zeller appear to be *staring* at the tableau, rather than dissecting it.

Hunching his shoulders against the icy drizzle, the Alpha steps around the tangle of roots spread out over the concrete and looks up at the arrangement.

'What've we got?'

Price sighs, his breath forming a thin cloud before his lips.

'He's literally *grafted* in place,' he replies, gesturing with a blue-gloved hand to the floor. 'These are living roots.'

'They're "varicose vines",' Zeller chuckles, earning himself a sharp look from Jack, and a slow nod of proud agreement for the pun from Price. Zeller coughs under the Alpha's scrutiny, and returns to his forensic analysis of the scene. 'Threaded *through*, er, from his heels, under his legs, his back, through his torso, out his fingertips… Followed some *pretty* tricky endoscopic surgical paths.'

It must have been agony.

'The Chesapeake Ripper usually cherry-picks his organs,' Price says, gazing into the flower arrangement. 'He took almost *all* of them. Everything but the lungs.'

Jack, having recently spent a great deal of time in florist shops buying bouquets for Bella's hospital room, narrows his eyes at the Ripper's choice.

'The *time* that he devotes to his work… He *really* takes pride.' At the Betas' blank looks, he nods to the arrangement. 'Belladonna for the heart, chain of white oleander for the intestines, ragwort for the liver…' He neglects to mention the red roses and magnolia nestled between cracked ribs, assuming they symbolize the blood and bone of the man.

'These flowers are all poisonous,' Price says, nodding his understanding.

'Yes,' Jack growls, his eyes prickling. 'This is judgement. The Ripper believes that his victim was *toxic* somehow… a poisonous man… He's so damn certain, it makes him sick.'

And that, in turn, makes Jack Crawford feel sick.

He's going to catch this son of a bitch, even if it kills him.

***

After the third time he came to his office unannounced, Hannibal had given Will a key for the front door, to use in the evenings and at weekends, when the building was closed to patients. Will had come to cherish that key, and used it often, dropping in on his Alpha whenever he needed comfort.

A place of safety.

Now, lying on his bunk in his hospital prison cell, stomach rumbling as he waits for dinner, Will rubs his fingertips together and brings them to his nose, inhaling the faint, echoing scent of rose petals. He hums, sinking into memories, recalling the first time he'd let himself in with that key.

The first time he'd let Hannibal touch his neck.

You'd had roses in the room then, too. I remember the smell.

That had also been the first time he'd seen that flash of predatory *hunger* in the Alpha's eyes; when Hannibal had pinned him up against the ladder, mouth stealing his breath and thigh crushing his erection.

I should have listened to my instincts, Will thinks, glaring up at the water stain on the ceiling and massaging his aching chest. *I knew you were dangerous, even then.*

He'd been in such a state after seeing dead Mrs Turner in the BSU morgue… After the jarring conversation with Beverly – *God, Beverly…* – and her two Betas. Zeller had correctly guessed that Will was an only child, though he'd incorrectly attributed his lack of a personality to the fact that he'd never had conflict growing up.

Bullshit assumption.

Sighing, Will drapes an arm over his eyes, trying to block out the encroaching thoughts. Despite his best efforts, they trickle through the gaps like water, slowly but surely drowning him in regret, each one a stone to weigh him down as the darkness bubbles ever higher within him.

Never had conflict? I wish.

He remembers the time he'd run away with his high school crush; the handsome Alpha quarterback, who'd promised to bond him and rescue him from his dreary life if Will gave him his virginity… The first time his dad had drunkenly shouted at him that he wished his mother had taken him with her, because then he wouldn't have to deal with his weird shit anymore… The day he'd presented as Omega, when he'd seen his dad make the sign of the cross over his heaving, sweating body; seen the feral *hunger* in Bill's eyes before the Beta had wrenched himself away and disappeared from the house until Will's first Heat had subsided…

A tear trickles down the side of his cheek, dripping into his ear. Will growls to himself, wiping it away, and rolls over, curling around himself as his vision grows thick and wavery. Why is he dwelling on this shit? He's an idiot… But he can't *stop*. The smell of roses has opened a door in his mind, and he can't close it again.

Hannibal had really made him *feel* the loss of his mother… The Alpha had *known* something was wrong the *moment* Will had barged into his office, stinking of morgue air and sweat. He'd abandoned the drawing he'd been working on and told him to sit. To tell him what had happened.

Closing his eyes, Will returns to the memory, watching himself sit in that familiar leather chair, white-knuckled hands clutching the armrests, knee bouncing as he describes the scene, describes how it *felt* to take on the memory of the kill; the personality of the killer. He sees himself sigh, rubbing at his stubble before summarizing it in one, flat sentence.

'The whole family, murdered. And I think it was the son. The boy. The one who went missing.'

Hannibal sits quietly as Will speaks. He projects an air of casual elegance, one long leg crossed over the other and hands clasped in his lap, wearing a grey-checked three-piece suit and white silk tie, but his dark eyes gleam as he stares at Will, utterly absorbed with everything he says.

'Why do you think this case has affected you so profoundly?' he asks, drawing a scowl from the other man.

'Oh, I don't know,' Will snarls, baring his teeth even as his eyes flash gold. 'Maybe because a *kid* killed his *mother?'*

Hannibal, as always, remains unfazed by Will's aggression.

'Would it have been as traumatic if it had been just the father?' he asks, tilting his head. 'The siblings?'

‘No,’ Will says, shaking his head, even as his heart leaps and his hand twitches into a fist. ‘*No*, of *course* not… No… It just…’ He blows out his breath, massaging the tightness in his temples. ‘God, I don’t know… I don’t *know* why I’m so upset…’

A moment of silence; Hannibal considers him, considers everything he’s just given away in that one statement, and then he pokes the proverbial bear again.

‘Tell me about your mother.’

Will, standing by the couch, watches the other version of himself tense up at the question. Watches the way his shoulders lock and his eyes glow gold, and then he hears himself growl, long and low, under his breath.

‘Some *lazy* psychiatry, Dr Lecter,’ Will snaps, spitting acid with every word. ‘Low hanging fruit?’

‘I suspect that fruit is on a high branch,’ Hannibal replies. ‘Very difficult to reach.’

‘So is my mother,’ Will replies, his mouth turning down in an unhappy grimace, even as his heart starts to race and his palms sweat. He shakes his head. ‘Never knew her.’

‘An interesting place to start,’ Hannibal says.

I’ll bet, Will thinks, remembering thinking the same thing at the time.

He watches the other version of himself huff and roll his neck, trying to relieve the knots gathering there. He remembers *really* not wanting to talk about his mom; about the fact that she’d probably been an Alpha, and left his father as soon as she gave birth to him…

Some Alphas couldn’t stand the thought of creating an Omega. As if was a personal weakness or fault that could only be fixed by abandoning the child.

Hannibal had had roses in the room at that time…

Roses mean love…

A new image swims before his eyes, but nothing he’s ever really seen before. A man, rising from the trunk of a cherry blossom tree… Threaded with vines, molded into the plant he’d been so intent on destroying… The torso sliced open, the lid removed, and ribs cracked wide to create a basket.

A posy for his love…

The heart is belladonna, the intestines white oleander, coiled beneath a red rose stomach. Ragwort for the liver and a magnolia spleen…

Will sees it all, in perfect, jarring detail, and he *knows*.

Hannibal killed this man, and he’s using him to send a message to Will.

Gazing at the arrangement, Will feels a strange swoop of excitement in his stomach. He understands *exactly* what Hannibal is saying to him. He can read the message his Ripper has left in blood and petals, and it makes him uneasy with how *happy* he feels.

You have a dark and deadly heart, mylimasis. I am humbled by your attack. As proud as I am to be your mate, proud of the darkness growing within you, I am cautious of the love I feel for you. But you are mine, Will, and I am yours. Everlasting.

Hannibal is coming for him.

***

Reluctant to host Jack Crawford in his home, Hannibal invites the other Alpha to his office when Jack asks to see him that evening. They sit in the winged armchairs before the crackling fire, sipping Cognac from crystal snifters.

'There is a pattern taking shape,' Jack says, staring deep into the flames crackling in the fireplace. 'I just have to convince my eyes to see it.'.

'I've convinced myself of something I refused to see for a long time,' Hannibal replies, glancing down into the amber liquid held between his hands. Painting himself the victim, still. Wondering how Jack now views the colors he uses for his disguise.

Jack hums, raising both eyebrows at him in a gently incredulous stare.

'And it only took Will Graham trying to *kill* you to see it?'

'Yes,' Hannibal says, his gaze distant. He sighs, his chest tight. 'I can't help Will… I can't trust him.' Tears well in his eyes, and he swallows.

It's the truth. For all his subterfuge, Will truly has made him a victim.

He has scared him.

'He's in a dark place where the shadows move and it's not safe to stand with him anymore,' he continues, thinking again of the shattered teacup and the razor sharp fragments that is his partner. He needs to help Will put the pieces back together… To find his way back to him…

'I feel the same way,' Jack says, and Hannibal represses the urge to growl at him because *Jack has no idea* how Hannibal feels. Proving his point, Jack, in his typical brash manner, shifts as he forces the conversation towards his true topic.

'We, er…' He coughs, fastidiously avoiding Hannibal's eyes and ploughing on through the guilt at using the good Doctor's intelligence. 'We found another Ripper victim –'

Hannibal shakes his head, stopping him before he can begin.

'I'm sorry, Jack. I can't.'

Jack looks at him, disappointment scored in the lines of his face, but Hannibal merely sighs.

‘Not only do I have to let Will go; I have to let this *all* go,’ he says softly. ‘… I nearly died. I would have, if it weren’t for you.’

Jack nods, a minute acknowledgement of the debt that is owed.

Hannibal shakes his head again.

‘I’m sorry. I can’t dwell on death anymore.’

I have to focus on life. Mine, and Will’s.

‘I don’t blame you,’ Jack says, shaking his head and taking a long, slow sip of brandy.

‘We both have to transform our misfortunes into life-enhancing events,’ Hannibal says, watching Jack swill the expensive spirit around his mouth before swallowing, even as he rolls his eyes.

‘Well, when you figure out how to *do* that, *do* let me know,’ Jack replies, smiling at him.

Hannibal feels the first tug of his lips, his face awash with the heat from the fire as he stares into the brilliance of the light.

Fire… like the heart… another potent symbol of life and passion. Love burns hot and bright like a flame but, like a flame, it can cause pain and even death.

Will is his fire, now.

It’s time to put the next piece into play.

‘I’m going to start by hosting a dinner party,’ he says, tipping his head back to savor the burn of brandy in his throat even as the air suddenly sharpens with fear-laced rut from Jack. Hannibal smirks to himself, his eyes glinting, and turns to grin at the other Alpha. ‘And *please* tell me you’ll come.’

Come on, Jack…

Jack lifts his snifter, eyes glinting with suspicion but mouth smiling genially, and they clink their glasses together.

‘I wouldn’t miss it.’

***

One of the worst parts about prison is the time. Time to think, time to worry. Time to revisit every little regret and magnify it until it consumes you.

Sitting on his bunk after breakfast that morning, with his back to the wall and knees hugged to his chest, Will revisits his most recent and conflicting regret.

Telling Alana Bloom that he intended to do something to Hannibal.

She may never have asked to speak to Gideon, and never known anything was going to happen to Hannibal. Matthew would have killed him, the bond would be broken and I'd –

A sharp pain stops him, cutting off his breath and making his eyes swim.

Is that why he'd told Alana?

Had he never really intended Hannibal to die…?

'Awfully *morose* today, Mr Graham.'

A drawling, nasal voice cuts through his thoughts, and Will turns his head, revulsion slithering down his spine to pool as acid in his stomach.

Abel Gideon is in the neighboring cell, separated by a three-foot thick wall but breathing the same recycled air. Although he's been quiet since their first meeting, Alphas are predators, and they cannot resist the scent of distress. It's no surprise he can't keep quiet. Will can *smell* the salty tang of misery choking his sugary musk.

'Well, I *am* in a hospital with the criminally insane,' he replies, eyes searching the ceiling as he speaks.

'Hm, yes… Well, at least you still have your mate,' Gideon purrs, and Will does nothing to repress the growl rumbling in his throat.

'You should've let him die.'

'Shoulda, coulda, woulda,' Gideon replies, and Will huffs, rolling his eyes at the man's insufferable lack of awareness. Of himself *and* the tenuous situation in which he finds himself.

'He's gonna kill you, y'know,' he warns.

There's a beat of silence, broken only by the tell-tale scratch of rats, and then he hears Gideon sigh.

'Can't get me in here.'

Will snorts, his lips curling into a bitter smile at the Alpha's naivety.

'No, here is *exactly* where he'll get you, Abel. The moment I convinced the Chief of Staff to put you in a cell next to me, you were *stamped* with an expiration date.' He tightens his hands around his knees, repressing a shiver. 'Anyone who gets too close, gets *got*. He's the devil, remember? Smoke.'

I got got… How else is Hannibal going to hurt me?

Static crackles, reminding him of the ever-present microphones. Time to use them to his advantage.

‘I’d be *very* nervous, if I was Dr Chilton,’ Will continues, imagining Frederick in his office, stretched out on his couch with his laptop on his knees and earphones on, listening in like a creepy voyeur. He might even have a glass of whiskey in hand… ‘He’s getting close, too,’ he adds, making it sound like an ominous afterthought. ‘The only way you and Frederick are gonna get out of this alive is if the Chesapeake Ripper is *stopped*.’

Pain slices at his crest and his heart squeezes out an extra beat. It hurts so much to even *think* it, but it’s the truth, so he grits his teeth and forces the words out past the lump in his throat.

‘Hannibal Lecter deserves to die.’

‘You didn’t bring me here to help you kill Hannibal Lecter,’ Gideon snaps, clearly annoyed by the Omega’s insistent cautions.

‘No, I didn’t.’ Will relents quickly, smelling his own pheromones change as they become rich and sweet, like a soothing balm.

Fucking biology…

‘I brought you here to bear witness,’ he says, and Abel scoffs.

‘To tell Jack Crawford that I sat in Hannibal Lecter’s cobalt-blue dining room, an ostentatious herb-garden with *Leda and the Swan* over the fireplace and you going into heat in the corner, and *that’s* where I asked him if he was the Chesapeake Ripper and he avoided the question and suggested I kill Alana Bloom?’

That’s it… That’s it!

Will’s pulse quickens and his breath catches as his eyes flood gold.

‘Yes,’ he whispers. ‘Tell Jack *that*.’

Please… please tell him… Please let him believe… I have to stop him… He has to stop killing… I can’t be mated to a killer… I can’t be in love with a killer.

‘I’ll tell Jack Crawford everything, if *you* tell me why Hannibal *did* it,’ Abel replies, and Will has to swallow again, certainty making him feel sick.

Why did Hannibal ever do *anything?*

‘Because he wanted to see what would happen.’

***

‘ – and *that’s* where I asked him if he was the Chesapeake Ripper and he avoided the question and suggested I kill Alana Bloom?’

Gideon’s voice, recorded on wiretap, sounds tinny as it plays from Frederick Chilton’s phone. The smaller Alpha raises his eyebrows at the significance of the confession, but Jack Crawford, sat behind his desk at Quantico the next morning, doesn’t seem too convinced.

‘Abel Gideon is a *lunatic*,’ Jack says, shaking his head as he gestures to the phone. Frederick sighs, and slips it back into the breast pocket of his suit jacket.

‘He is psychotic,’ he says, but a satisfied smile plays with his lips. ‘Not psychic.’

Jack shrugs, his features hardening a fraction.

‘We know that Gideon has a history of being susceptible to suggestion,’ he says, reminding Chilton of his own failings as a psychiatrist.

Frederick ignores the slight, continuing to smirk down at his fellow Alpha.

‘The simplest explanation as to why he can describe Hannibal Lecter’s home, is that he was *in* Hannibal Lecter’s home.’

He groans, his back aching, and eases himself down into one of the chairs beside him.

Jack sighs, and tries again, pointing to add emphasis as he speaks.

‘Will Graham could have given him the details.’

‘No such details were given,’ Chilton replies, shaking his head. He smooths his hand over the sterling silver handle of his walking cane. ‘There has not been a *word* exchanged between those two men in my hospital that I have not heard.’

Jack growls, just once, beneath his breath.

‘Then you’re *aware* what Will is accusing Hannibal Lecter of?’

‘Oh *yes*,’ Frederick replies, his eyes prickling red as a drop of fear settles like ice in the pit of his stomach. ‘I am aware… And I am grateful that I have trouble digesting animal proteins, as the last meals I have shared with Hannibal Lecter have all been salads.’

Jack is quiet for a moment, considering Chilton over the top of clasped hands.

‘Do you believe him?’

Chilton’s burgundy eyes glitter.

‘Hannibal once served me tongue and then made a *joke* about eating *mine*,’ he says. ‘It would be narrow to not at *least* consider it.’

Jack shakes his head, like a bull trying to shake off flies.

‘Will is *delusional*,’ he growls. ‘He would like to reinforce his delusion with *you*, with me, with Abel Gideon.’

‘That doesn’t mean he is not *right*,’ Frederick reasons, and Jack sighs.

‘No… It doesn’t.’ He nods, smiling bitterly, and Chilton’s eyes flash crimson as he scents something else. A spark of excitement in Jack. The thrill of the hunt. Sure enough, after a

moment, Jack continues, ‘The Chesapeake Ripper is killing again. *And* Hannibal Lecter *is* throwing a dinner party…’

Chilton’s breath catches and his heart skips a beat. He smiles off to the side, a deep purr rumbling in his chest.

‘Jack, he fits the profile…’ He looks at him again, smiling. ‘He is attracted to medical and psychological fields because they offer power over man… *Cannibalism*…?’ He blows out his breath, shaking his head in wonder. ‘Cannibalism is an act of *dominance*. The *ultimate* act, really… An ancient practice, especially among thoroughbred Alphas…’

Jack exhales, long and slow, through his nose. He clenches his teeth hard enough to make them ache, trying to ignore the doubt creeping like vines within the walls of his mind.

Was Will telling the truth this whole time…?

Is Hannibal the Chesapeake Ripper?

Only one way to find out.

***

Grey light filters through the tall window beside him, catching motes of dust as the sharp, somber notes of harpsichord music hang in the cool air.

Will is in pain.

Hannibal can feel the echo of his Omega’s kidney ache, stinging crest and nausea… Will is exhausted, unable to rest without his Alpha’s warmth and scent to comfort him… He is barely eating, and even his imagination is beginning to dwindle. Instead of watching him fish, surrounded by the crisp morning air of Wolf Trap, Virginia, or the thick swamp heat of Louisiana, Hannibal only sees the stone walls of his cell whenever he looks through Will’s eyes.

You’re fading, mylimasis.

He pauses on a progression of notes, feeling out where to go next.

What now? If he were to break first, to visit Will… Would the power shift between them?

Would it be so terrible?

Hannibal’s skin tingles, and he feels the muscles tighten in his abdomen and back. The idea of giving a little to Will… To have a more equal relationship… It scares and excites him.

His beloved has certainly earned the *right* to it.

The next notes are sweeter, filled with hope. A quick half-beat to simulate his racing pulse, and then the final, grounding chord of a decision. Hesitation becoming determination.

Hannibal leans forwards and scribbles out a note. It is no longer required.

And he is going to visit Will.

***

‘His name’s Sheldon Isley!’ Price yells, fighting to be heard above the whirring of the saw he and Zeller are using to break apart the tree branches. ‘A Baltimore city councilman!’

‘Ripper’s a politician now!’ Zeller shouts, wincing behind his goggles as chips fly from the blades. The branch suddenly drops, and the saw falls quiet.

‘At least a conservationist,’ Price says, nodding his thanks to Jack as the taller Alpha helps disentangle him from the cherry blossom branches. ‘Five or six years ago, Isley brokered a woodlands development deal, despite the disapproval of the EPA.’

‘So, the councilman paved paradise and put up a parking lot, huh?’ Jack nods, slowly. He can understand the Ripper’s anger on this one, though it’s no excuse for what he’s done.

‘Well, what he *paved* was an important nesting habitat for endangered songbirds,’ Price explains, glaring over at the corpse. ‘The son of a bitch.’

‘He was wearing *this* as a crown,’ Zeller says, handing Jack a metal tray with a bird’s nest on it. Removes his goggles to gesture to the body, still attached to the tree. ‘Autopsy report gave us what you’d expect from the Chesapeake Ripper,’ he continues. ‘Pre-mortem surgical dissection. Latex glove impressions… Body was posed before rigor set in.’

Jack nods, and removes his goggles as well.

‘What did the lungs cough up?’

‘Water.’ Zeller grins, and turns back to the tableau. ‘The councilman was drowned. Lungs filled with aspirated water. He was standing in water up to his thighs for forty-eight to seventy-two hours before he died.’

‘To feed the tree,’ Jack suggests, and Zeller shrugs.

‘Possibly.’

‘Now, *here’s* the exciting part,’ Price says, gesturing for Jack to look forwards his computer screen. ‘Tree man actually bears fruit… Diatoms,’ he explains, gesturing to the moving images. ‘Unicellular colonies. Good as fingerprints. No two water sources have the same diatom population.’

Jack nods, his heart squeezing tight.

‘Water in the lungs gives us location of death,’ he says. ‘Show me.’

Price clicks a button, and brings up a map of the area near Richmond, Virginia.

‘Here,’ he says, drawing a circle with his blue-gloved finger. ‘In a fifty-mile radius.’

Jack’s eyes glow red, and his throat rattles with a rich, satisfied purr.

We’ve got him.

***

To clear his head that afternoon, Jack decides to leave the office and join Alana Bloom in walking Will’s dogs.

The pack race off ahead down the woodland path, barking excitedly as they latch onto a rabbit trail, the big dogs in the lead and little Buster, Will’s terrier, bringing up the rear.

‘My head is filled with conspiracies,’ Alana says, her breath huffing out in a cloud in the cool air. ‘Too many versions of events. “He said she said… He said she *said* she said…” It’s just maddening.’ She shakes her head, shoving her leather-gloved hands into the pockets of her jacket.

‘In my experience, that means a lot of people are lying, about a lot of different things,’ Jack replies. Alana frowns at him, and then off to the front.

‘Well, the *one* thing I have clarity on is Will Graham tried to kill Hannibal.’ She shakes her head in disgust, baring her teeth at the very *idea* of it.

‘And thinks it was a righteous act,’ Jack says, feeling his irises prickle, even as his gut swarms with indecision.

‘Hmm.’ Alana reaches down to pet Winston, who licks her palm before trotting off again. ‘Well, that says more about *Will* than it does about Hannibal.’ She swallows, feeling her cheeks warm. ‘Hannibal’s been…’ *Everything*... ‘A teacher, a mentor and a *friend*. I’ve known him before you or Will or *any* of this.’

‘I don’t claim to know *anyone*,’ Jack says, but Alana simply quirks an eyebrow at him and then shakes her head.

She nods towards the pack.

‘I look at these dogs, I see the best part of Will.’ She fusses Jack-the-dog’s pointed ears, and the Alsatian-cross wags his curling tail. ‘But he’s lying,’ Alana continues. ‘He’s *manipulating*. He’s playing a game and he’s not scared. Not anymore.’

Her blue eyes are steely, her jaw clenched, and she growls under her breath at the Omega’s *idiocy* and his hatred for his *mate*. The man he’s *lucky* to be bonded to…

‘That’s what’s making him dangerous. *Especially* to Hannibal.’ She swallows, jealousy winding like a serpent in her belly. ‘A man who’s done *everything* for him… Who’s *still* doing everything for him… He’s risking his own safety, just to make Will *feel* better.’

‘He’s going to see him?’ Jack asks, eyebrows rising in surprise when Alana nods. ‘When?’

‘Today,’ Alana replies, shoving a curl of long brown hair behind her ear. ‘He’s on his way there now.’ Another sigh. Another swallow. ‘I just hope he knows what he’s doing.’

Jack sighs, his gaze distant as he watches the dogs running around them.

‘So do I.’

***

He’s coming…

Will’s heart hammers in his chest. He curls sweat-slick hands around the bars of his visitor’s cage, his dark shadow swelling and throbbing, licking tendrils out through his veins and up into his scalp. His skin is tingling, buzzing with a livewire just beneath the surface, even as a gnawing hunger rips his belly apart.

He’s coming now…

Antlers, sharp as razors, begins to push up from his scalp. They spread like brambles down his neck and across his shoulders, rising higher and wider, reaching up until they hit the mesh roof of his cage. Stronger than the steel, they punch through the gaps and the metal bends and folds away from them, silent in the nightmare truth only he can see.

Branches, just like Sheldon Isley’s cherry tree, reach out above the cage. The coppery taste of blood fills his mouth and Will’s stomach growls. His eyes flood gold, glowing behind tightly closed lids, and he grits his teeth as a rich, heady musk flows up his nostrils and settles like sugar on his tongue.

He’s here.

There’s a pause. A silence so heavy it may as well be water, drowning him. Will opens his eyes, his gaze fixed on the shimmering air between them, the *space* between them, and he breathes out.

‘Hello, Dr Lecter.’

Hannibal steps closer, his coat folded over his arm, keeping his own eyes averted even when he feels Will’s stare. Seeing his mate again, *smelling* him… After so long apart…

His lungs are so tight he can barely breathe. He hadn’t expected it to be so difficult. On the one hand, he wants to rip the door from Will’s cage, to cradle his Omega close to him and never let him go. On the other, he wants to rip Will’s throat open and bathe in his blood, or keep him forever locked in a glass room, slowly going mad with the need to be touched by him.

‘I feel like I’ve been watching our relationship on a split screen,’ he says, his throat aching. ‘The relationship I perceived on one side, and… the truth on the other.’

My ideal version of you, as someone worthy of my love, someone who understands me, and this righteous, reckless fool who insists on seeing me as a monster.

Will nods, and a tear slides down his cheek. This close to Hannibal, the distance is crushing. They are within touching distance, if they both reached out, but they might as well be miles apart. Heat slides up and down his spine, making his crest pulse and swell until it rasps against his jumpsuit. But the *rage* he felt when he learned the truth… The *fury* at Hannibal's lies and manipulations; that's still there. That's still adding a rasp of a growl to his voice.

'It's a *terrible* feeling, isn't it?'

Hannibal faces him, burgundy eyes boring into the back of his skull. He lets his mask slip, giving his mate a glimpse of the monster beneath.

'You've been lying to me, Will.'

Will swallows, wondering where his fear went. Hannibal is a monster… But he is *his* monster…

He sneers at his Alpha, and shrugs his shoulders.

'Well, I… I don't have a *gauge* for reality that works well enough to know if I've been *lying*,' he retorts, gracing Hannibal with a look of *deepest* loathing as he reminds him of the story Hannibal spun for him.

That he is a delusional, cannibalistic *murderer*.

Must have been so easy. You just modelled me after yourself.

'But you understand the reality of Beverly Katz's death,' Hannibal says, predator eyes still locked onto him. 'You understand your role in that?'

'My role?' Will almost chokes on his anger, blinking away more tears because he will *not* cry in front of this man again. 'What was my role?'

'Beverly died at your behest,' Hannibal explains, and the *simplicity* of his tone is like a punch. Will can do nothing but stare, even as his mate's gaze softens and poison slithers from his mouth. 'You are as angry with yourself as you are with… whoever murdered her.'

With me.

Will quivers, his blood boiling and lips tingling. He can't… That Hannibal would even *suggest*…

'Actually,' he whispers, eyes blazing gold and pupils shrinking to pinpricks. 'I am *singularly* angry with whoever murdered her.'

With you.

Hannibal nods, but his focus remains unwavering.

'You tried to kill me, Will. It's hard not to take that personally.'

He sees his Omega tremble, but, from his smoky, wildfire scent, it is not fear wracking him; it is pure, magnificent *rage*. Will is radiant with it; powerful in his focus, and Hannibal feels his body quickening at the sight.

That's my boy.

He glances down, a single, proud purr lodged deep behind his ribs.

'However, if I *were* Beverly's murderer… I'd applaud your effort,' he adds, leaving the rest unspoken but plain to hear.

And I would forgive you.

Will gulps back a whine of longing at the *devotion* on Hannibal's face, the sick, twisted *pride* in his voice and in his purr. But his body reacts to the adoration, the electric current rising inside him until it makes the fine hairs on his arms and neck stand on end. He knows what Hannibal wants from him; his Alpha wants him to own his attack. To take responsibility for sending another Alpha after him.

Forcing his hands down to his sides, Will manages a crooked smile. Very well.

'Oh, I'm no more guilty of what you've accused *me* of than *you* are of what I've accused *you* of.'

Hannibal smiles at Will's confession and, as a reward, takes a step closer.

That's it, Will. You're learning.

'I don't expect you to feel self-loathing or regret or shame,' he says, giving word to the emotions he's been sensing from the other man and absolving him. 'You knew what you were doing, and you made your own decisions. Decisions that were under your control.'

Fresh disbelief snatches Will's breath, and he whimpers before he can help it.

'You think I'm in *control?'*

Hannibal purrs again, long and low, and his eyes warm to a deep maroon as he gazes into the face of his beloved.

'I think you are more in control now than you have *ever* been.' At Will's questioning frown, he explains, 'You found a way to hurt me.'

Another whimper catches in Will's throat, and he realizes he's stepped forwards before he can stop himself.

'You hurt me first,' he whispers, fresh tears threatening to fall.

Hannibal sighs, and sets his coat on the back of the chair set off to the side. He closes the last of the gap between them, his scent coating Will's stinging skin, soothing him and enticing him to press up against the bars.

‘Yes,’ Hannibal admits. ‘We are both guilty of wounding the other.’

He pushes the sleeves of his jacket up, revealing the ugly stitches on his inner wrists and, at the sight of them, Will sways, cold dizziness swamping him even as his shadow roars its approval.

He reaches out before he can stop himself, his breath punching its way from him in a sob the *second* he touches his mate’s arm. Lightning jumps between them, kickstarting his heart into a frantic rhythm, and Will mewls, an instinctive sound at the sight of his Alpha’s wounds. He pulls Hannibal’s hand into the cage with him and dips his head to the threaded skin, his purr high and melodic as he begins to lick along the injury, rasping the width of his tongue over the area and coating it with his spit.

Hannibal groans, sliding the fingers of his free hand through Will’s shaggy curls as his mate tends to his left cut. His skin tingles wherever Will touches him, and warmth flares inside the ripped muscles of his forearm as the saliva heals him. He presses up as close to the cage as he can, peppering his Omega’s forehead with kisses.

‘Thank you,’ he whispers, pressing the words into Will’s temple. ‘Thank you, *mylimasis*. Thank you.’

Will growls, just once, warning him to shut up, and then tilts his head into the touch, nuzzling at Hannibal’s right wrist.

Hannibal switches hands, petting Will as his mate laps at the other row of stitches, his mind clouded with a myriad of emotions, many of which he had thought long buried. Fear and regret… Something deeper, gnawing at him and making his gut squirm uncomfortably.

He makes me want to reverse time. To choose a different path for us both.

What if I’d never sent him here?

‘God; I’m so fucking *angry* with you,’ Will breathes, releasing Hannibal’s arm to glare up into his face. His chest is heaving but the air is so *thin* in here…

Before his Alpha can say anything, he fists both hands Hannibal’s silky blond hair and yanks him down for a kiss, bashing Hannibal’s cheek against the metal bars in the process. The *taste* of his mate, after so many weeks apart, is like life itself, and Will shudders, fire flooding his veins.

He wants to *hurt* Hannibal, and devour him, and also be cradled by him and taken *home* at the same time. He wants to punish him for what he’s done to Beverly, to *him*, to all those innocent people, but, more than anything, he wants to get rid of this feeling inside him, this *excitement* at the idea of *really* seeing his mate for the first time.

He hates that he wants to take Hannibal’s person suit off, and fuck the monster beneath.

Hannibal slides his fingers through Will’s hair, marveling at the feel of it caressing his skin, soaking up the smell of him and drinking him down because he’s missed him *so* much, and

he's been *so* cold and *so* empty without him, and there's something different about him now, something that makes him want to burn the world down for him…

It only took him trying to kill me.

He dips his hand lower, reaching for Will's crest, his own scent gland swelling to an obvious nub at the front of his throat as he runs his fingertips down the five ridges. But the skin there is scabbed and rough, and Will winces even as his hips snap forwards. Hannibal growls, his eyes flickering crimson, and he pushes on Will's shoulder, encouraging him to turn around.

'Take your top off.'

'Why –?'

'Will.'

Will huffs even as he obeys, scowling over at the far wall, but he pops open the front of his jumpsuit and shrugs out of the sleeves. Hannibal's hands pull at the hem of his t-shirt, hampered by the bars of the cage, and Will tugs it up, yanking it over his head and holding it to his chest, his nipples hardening in the cool air. His crest prickles, still raw from Hannibal's near-death, and, to his horror, two hot tears splash onto his arms when he bows his head.

'Sssh…' Hannibal's throat fills with an uncomfortable lump as Will sniffs. He eases the smaller man towards him, encouraging him to lean back until Will is up against the cage door, and then he loops his arms as far through the bars as he can and hugs him tight.

Will shivers, squeezing his eyes tight shut as his Alpha holds him. He can hear the pathetic little whimpers bubbling up from deep inside him, and he links his fingers with Hannibal's over his belly, spreading Hannibal's palms flat to the skin. His heartbeat is pounding everywhere inside him, and he is both terrified and so *calm* he could stay like this forever.

He could bite the crest off me right now, and be free of me… Or he could heal me… Just like I healed him.

Hannibal dips his head closer, his lips curving into a hungry smile as his Omega presses back towards him. Will's scent is strongest in his crest, and Hannibal takes a moment to savor it, noting each difference as the layers settle across the roof of his mouth. It is richer, now; thick as molasses. Still sweet, but there is a second tang to it, like honey and blood, and he moans softly at how *good* Will smells.

'Never change,' he whispers, rubbing circles around Will's navel. 'Stay like this, forever.'

Will parts his lips to answer, but the feel of Hannibal's tongue on his crest robs him of his voice. His eyes roll back and his knees buckle, his ass clenching up around nothing before spilling a gush of boiling slick down his thighs. It's not meant to be sexual, but the *relief* is so sudden and so sweet that it is a climax of its own kind, and he knows Hannibal feels it, too. Salt from their tears bleeds into the air, and they grip each other tightly as Hannibal continues to lap at the ridges, cleaning and healing Will's skin.

Sagging in the embrace, Will blows out his breath at the feel of teeth nipping at a scab, and wincing at the sharp sting before fresh blood wells. Hannibal's purrs become louder and deeper, and there's still a worried part of him that wonders if his Alpha is slowly going to nip the crest off, drawing out the torture…

'Relax, Will.'

Hannibal kisses the glistening blood, sucking at the scratched and bruised skin around the scar. He transfers Will's white-knuckled grip into his right hand and slides his left up his chest, rubbing a warm palm over his tender pecs before gripping him by the throat. Will squirms, kicking backwards as the choke hold tightens, and Hannibal chuckles in his ear even as he returns to licking between the burning hot, burgundy ridges of his crest.

Fuck…

Will jerks, golden eyes flying open as pleasure races through him. He can still breathe, though Hannibal's hand around his throat forces him to keep his head back, and he's so hard it *hurts*. He can feel himself getting swept up in the hormones; in the *instinct* of it, but it's so nice not to be in pain… To feel *good* for a change…

He needs this… He needs Hannibal. Needs his Alpha… He needs to know they're still together… Still a pair. No matter what.

Hannibal digs his thumb into Will's carotid artery, feeling his Omega's pulse battering against the pressure, and he hums his satisfaction even as he begins to bite down harder, reclaiming Will as his own.

White heat spirals inside him, drawing his balls up, and Will blushes at the high-pitched keening sound he starts to make, his back arching and ass grinding back towards the erection he can feel tenting his Alpha's pants.

'Fuck you,' he hisses, writhing in the grip, scratching bloody half-moon marks into the back of Hannibal's right hand as he clings on tight, wracked by waves of gold-sparked pleasure that just don't *stop.* Don't let him *breathe*. Keep coming until he's sure he's going to break apart from them… 'Fuck you… Fuck you.'

Smirking, Hannibal releases Will's spit-soaked and swollen crest, his Omega still trapped up against the side of the cage. Will tilts his head back, a pink flush spreading down his cheeks and across his neck. His forehead and chest are shining with sweat, and Hannibal can see the first signs of slick darkening the back of his jumpsuit.

He looks debauched and utterly delicious.

'Oh *fuck*, Han-' Will bites his lower lip, growling under his breath at the near-slip. He looks to the side, trying to see the Alpha behind him, and wriggles in the unrelenting grasp. 'Why'd you stop?'

Struggling to regain his composure, Hannibal is silent for a moment. He nuzzles the back of Will's hair, forcing himself to take a deep and steadying breath, and then kisses Will's crest

again.

‘Do you want me to make you come, Will?’

Hannibal’s voice is low and rough, sending a sizzle of fresh heat through him. Will shudders again, tugging upwards on his Alpha’s right hand to bring it to his lips. Blindly turning it, he presses wet, open-mouthed kisses to Hannibal’s knuckles, palm and then his wrist, working his way along until he reaches the sharp nubs of stitches again, laving at the cut in the hopes that Hannibal will reciprocate with his crest.

Yes.

‘*Will…’*

Hannibal closes his eyes, squeezing tighter around the other man’s throat. He returns to Will’s crest, dutifully mirroring every one of Will’s moves on his arm. He can feel his mate’s breath grow ragged, hot pants leaving imprints on his skin, and, when Will’s heartbeat becomes erratic, and his movements lose co-ordination as his focus shrinks to the feel of pleasure spiraling inside him, he sinks his teeth into the muscle around the ridges, shaking his head from side to side to break the flesh and spill blood.

Fuck!

Will convulses, his thighs shaking as his orgasm hits him, shattering his mind the moment Hannibal bites him. White fire crashes through him, washing away any thought that isn’t *Hannibal*, and Will almost chokes himself on the other man’s hand, his hips jumping forwards as he spills himself into cheap prison boxers, clenching over and over around *nothing,* his heart stuttering to a halt at the sheer *rightness* of it all, even if his Alpha isn’t inside him. Because it’s *his* Alpha making him come. *His* Alpha touching him and owning him again. *His* Alpha’s blood in his mouth from where Will has bitten into his arm, and *his* Alpha’s hips rocking up against his ass, breath shaky in his ear.

‘*Will…*’

Hannibal breathes Will’s name like a prayer, moving his arms to hug the other man tight, covering him in his scent. His purrs ring out through the visitor’s room, and he smiles when Will sags, letting himself be held. But the other man doesn’t remain in his embrace for long; Will swallows and steps away, breaking out of the hold and pulling his t-shirt back on, even going as far as to pull his jumpsuit back up and re-do the poppers.

‘This doesn’t *change* anything,’ Will mutters, lips pressed into a thin, unhappy line as he turns to face his Alpha once again. ‘It was just what we both needed.’

Hannibal raises his eyebrows down at himself, at his still obvious hardness, and curls his lips into a smile.

‘Perhaps what *you* needed,’ he says softly, earning a mirthless chuckle from Will.

‘Well, there should always be *some* give and take in a relationship, *Doctor*.’ Will’s nostrils flare and the gold in his eyes dims back to fierce, furious blue. ‘You’ve taken so much from me, recently… I figured it was time you gave a little back.’

Hannibal’s maroon eyes gleam, a curious smile still lingering about his mouth. He regards Will quietly for several seconds, and then calmly retrieves his coat from the chair.

‘Very well, Will. As much as it hurts my feelings, I understand your sentiment.’

Will holds himself still, sensing another shift in the balance of power. The pendulum had swung to him, but as he watches, he can almost *see* its slow descent as it returns to Hannibal.

He is, after all, still the one in a cage.

Hannibal sighs, and smooths a crease from his coat.

‘You know, Will, nobody has *ever* made me as vulnerable as you do,’ he says, gaze coldly thoughtful. ‘Physically *and* emotionally…’

‘The feeling’s mutual,’ Will mutters. Hannibal hums, his expression unchanged.

‘You sent another Alpha to kill me,’ he says. ‘Knowing, perhaps, that I could win, in which case, you sent Matthew to his death… I wonder how many more people are going to get hurt by what you do?’

Will sees the monster inside Hannibal rise again, hovering just beneath the surface, and he realizes, with a sickening jolt, that when Hannibal had forgiven him for trying to kill him, he’d assumed he’d also forgiven him for *how* he did it.

For sending Matthew after him. For offering to bond with another Alpha.

For cheating on him.

Oh, shit…

Hannibal tilts his head, as cruel and calculating as ever as he drives his parting words deep into his Omega’s mind.

‘I’ll give Alana Bloom your best. Goodbye.’

***

After giving himself a sharp squeeze, Hannibal steps out of the stale air of the hospital, finding his disposition greatly improved. His arms are already feeling stronger than before, and Will’s scent lingers on his skin and in his nose, coating his tongue and the backs of his teeth.

That should keep me going until he comes home.

He grins to himself, buttoning up his overcoat and striding towards his car. Will's anxiety over his parting words adds a delicious zing to their bond, and he deliberately ignores his mate's desperate attempts to communicate with him through their bond.

He has no intention of hurting Alana. Not until it becomes necessary. But he shall hurt Will.

An attempt on my life, I understand. Your righteous wrath is intoxicating. But the sly, sex-fueled manipulations to get another Alpha to attack me?

You're better than that, Will.

Despite his disappointment at Will's previous actions, Hannibal's fervor remains all the drive home, and he finds himself eager to begin preparations for his dinner party. After all, such events require meticulous planning and, one might argue, killing, and presenting one's victims as art, is equally painstaking.

He needs a day, maybe two, to get everything ready.

Parking the Bentley, Hannibal enters through the back door into the kitchen and shrugs out of his suit jacket, hanging his tie and waistcoat with it on one of the hooks in the pantry. He rolls up his shirtsleeves, pausing for a moment to inspect the cuts on his inner arms. Will's saliva has greatly increased the speed of his healing, and the redness of the lines has already paled since seeing his Omega.

Another few days and he'll be able to remove the stitches.

Thank you indeed, mylimasis.

Switching on his Bluetooth speaker, Hannibal selects a playlist of Strauss waltzes, and then turns his attention to his recipe box and business card index.

In honor of the damage his own beloved has done to him, he shall begin with heart.

If only you were here to host with me. How much better this would feel…

***

As the Chesapeake Ripper strikes and the bodies pile up in the FBI's morgue, Hannibal creates intricate canapés of heart tartare, grinding the meat into a carefully seasoned paste and then making buttery, flaky filo pastry in which to house it. Then, he creates delicate beef roulades, perfectly grilled to keep the meat tender on the inside, and edible sculptures of wagyu beef.

His centerpiece, however, is a slate display of the same prosciutto roses on chunks of watermelon that Will dreamed about.

He has his *mylimasis* to thank for the inspiration.

The final invitations are hand-written in his flowing calligraphy, waiting staff confirmed for the evening and a string quartet booked.

Satisfied with his work, Hannibal settles back to wait for Jack Crawford to pounce.

Ready or not. Here he comes.

***

Three days after Hannibal's visit, Will's attention is drawn by the buzz of a door opening somewhere in the bowels of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. He hears two sets of footsteps and then a third, shuffling gait, accompanied by the smell of cheap, powdery soap and the sadly familiar scent of Dr Abel Gideon. Back from his half-hour's exercise, then. Will's internal clock must be off; it doesn't seem to have been that long since he went.

Abel Gideon's hands are cuffed to his belt, but because the Orderly is a Beta, he is also held by Jason, the young Alpha guard so smitten with Will, using a steel herding lasso. Despite these restrictions, he still smirks when he sees the fragile Dr Chilton stood at one end of the corridor. Poor Frederick tries his best not to shiver at his approach, but his knuckles whiten perceptibly on his walking cane, and his throat bobs with a tell-tale gulp.

It must have been so terribly traumatic, after all, to have one's organs ripped out and displayed in a gift basket by a psychopathic murderer…

'So,' Abel drawls, pushing red into his eyes until they flash. 'It seems all the king's horses and all the king's men could *indeed* put Humpty together again.'

Chilton's scent thickens with fear, and Abel purrs.

'Is everything *back* where I *found* it?'

'With one or two exceptions,' Chilton growls, trying to sound angry through all that delicious *terror*. 'I know people who consider me autocratic,' the Chief of Staff continues, lowering his voice a fraction, smugly silky as Abel narrows his eyes at him. 'Not the most *loved* of administrators. But that nurse you murdered…? She *was* well liked. So were the attendants you killed.'

Chilton's dark eyes flicker red and he grins, tilting his head as the Orderly's hand twitches at mention of the murdered nurse.

'There is nothing like grief and trauma to pull people together,' he continues. His smile fades, replaced by a look of disdain for his prisoner. 'Jack Crawford would like to have a word with you.'

Yes…

Sat in his cell, listening to Frederick's voice echo through the corridor, Will's heart skitters behind the bars of his ribcage. Hope is a dangerous thing, but he can't help but think that, if anyone could catch Hannibal, it would be Jack Crawford.

The doubt is spreading. If Jack is willing to speak to *Abel Gideon*, then the Ripper must be killing again.

‘I *trust* you will *behave* yourself, Abel,’ Chilton warns, and the other Alpha lowers his eyes, deferentially silent. Silence, after all, allows for many assumptions to be made.

Once safely locked inside a narrow cage within the visitor’s room, Abel stands back to watch as Jack Crawford plants himself before him, stinking of rut and hunt pheromones, all burgundy-eyed and alive with passion.

It’s almost laughable that they can’t see the strings controlling them.

‘I’m sure you and Frederick have had *many* a conversation about my bad behavior, *Jack*,’ Abel drawls. ‘How does he describe me?’

‘A pure sociopath, by the *book*,’ Chilton sneers, keeping well back from the line on the tiled floor.

‘Is that by your book, Frederick?’ Abel asks, smirking at him. Chilton narrows his eyes.

‘Yes.’

Abel snorts.

‘Well, I would just like to point out that the word “sociopath” has not been used by any *respected* psychiatrist since 1968.’

‘Dr Gideon, do you have any information about the Chesapeake Ripper or not?’ Jack growls.

‘Down to brass tacks,’ Abel murmurs, watching as the other Alpha bares his teeth in a snarl.

‘You told Will Graham that you were in Dr Lecter’s home,’ Jack says. ‘Why were you there?’

‘I have never set *foot* in Dr Lecter’s home,’ Abel lies, meeting Jack’s gaze squarely and without flinching. ‘I only *met* the man a week ago.’ A quick glance towards Frederick. A grin. ‘However, Dr *Chilton* was kind enough to share the details of his dining room.’

‘Why would he do that?’ Jack replies, speaking over a low growl of outrage from Frederick himself.

‘Yes, *why* would he *do* that?’

Abel sighs.

‘Will *Graham* is very keen to believe that Hannibal Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper,’ he says. ‘Dr Chilton did very little to disavow him of that notion, even though Dr Lecter is Will’s Alpha, *and*… well…’ He grins. ‘He encouraged me to do the same.’

Frederick huffs out a frustrated sigh, shrugging as Jack turns to him.

‘I apologize, Agent Crawford, for… *wasting* your time.’

Abel sneers at him from his side of the bars.

‘It’s not your actions and *betrayal* that I *resent*, Dr Chilton,’ he says. ‘It’s just the *lies*.’

‘Mm-hm.’ Ignoring him, Frederick cups Jack’s elbow. ‘I’ll walk you out,’ he says, though he waits behind as Jack starts for the stairs out.

‘Thank you.’

‘Dr Chilton hired a nurse who’s had experience in mental hospitals, but *not* as an employee,’ Abel calls, his focus on Jack alone. ‘That nurse attempted to murder Hannibal Lecter, and *you* blame Will Graham, the man’s *Omega*.’ He tuts under his breath, draping his arms through the cage. ‘You got the right box there, Jack, but you’re looking in the wrong corner.’

Grinning to himself, Abel tracks Frederick’s slow, painful exit up the stairs.

The man so desperately wants to be infamous…

***

At seven o’clock that evening, the crème de la crème of Baltimore High Society gathers in the entrance hall and reception rooms of Dr Hannibal Lecter’s townhouse, their gentle, stifled conversations accompanied by the crunching of perfectly crisp pastry and the notes of violins and a cello.

Standing with Hannibal by his black lacquer harpsichord, Alana Bloom tries not to notice how *handsome* he looks, in a burgundy ascot, white shirt and black blazer, focusing instead on the string quartet’s impeccable playing.

As he steps into the hall, Jack Crawford is grateful that he took the time to pop home to change his suit, putting on the blue shirt and matching silk tie that Bella bought for him as a wedding anniversary present for them both. Looking around, he can’t keep the frown from his face as he notices the elaborate canapes being consumed by the guests.

‘You and I probably sipped wine while swallowing the people to whom we were trying to give justice!’

Will’s voice echoes in his mind, sending a cold lick of unease through his gut. He is grateful that he ate before arriving.

Dr Frederick Chilton clearly shares his sentiment, and grimaces at him as he sidles over, holding a small pastry tart decorated with that *looks* like a bird’s leg.

‘Prosciutto roses… Heart tartare… Beef roulade…’ The smaller Alpha lifts up his canape. ‘Whatever *this* is.’ He swallows. ‘Needless to say, *I* will not be eating the food.’

To prove his point, he places his serving on the tray of a passing water, wiping greasy crumbs from his fingers.

‘Nice to see you again, Dr Chilton,’ Jack says, dark eyes continually scanning the room. Alana Bloom is hovering near their humble host, diamond earrings glinting in the lamplight, dark hair curled into a shining bun and cheeks pink from wine and humor. She is dressed in a

beautiful blue gown, courtesy, no doubt, of Hannibal himself, and receiving numerous compliments on her outfit.

Chilton scoffs, and narrows his eyes at the tall, regal Alpha.

'Hannibal the Cannibal…' He shakes his head. 'That is what they'll call him, you know.'

'*Not* according to Abel Gideon,' Jack growls, reminding him of his bumbling error earlier. Chilton rolls his eyes.

'Gideon has given me enough trouble for one day.' His eyes gleam burgundy. 'The fact that he lied to you makes me even *more* certain he was telling Will Graham the truth.'

'Why did you come here tonight, if you're so convinced?' Jack asks, gaze still locked on Hannibal's back.

'Darwinism,' Chilton replies, his heart skipping a beat at the very *idea* of being attacked by Hannibal. 'I do not want him to think I suspect *anything*.' As Jack looks over, unimpressed, Chilton raises one dark eyebrow. 'I really shouldn't be *seen* speaking to you… *I* don't wanna be perceived as a threat.'

And, with that, Chilton creeps back into the crowd, continually unenthusiastic to each dish offered to him.

Hannibal turns, and smiles when he sees the Head of the Behavioral Science Unit. He excuses himself from Alana's side and approaches his colleague, dark eyes shuttered but face open as he reaches to shake with him.

'Jack, I'm *so* happy you're here.' He grips him tight, testing his healing arms, pleased to find his hold firmer than before. 'After all; you're the guest of honor. You saved my life.'

'Unfortunately, my friend, I can't stay,' Jack says, and then, as though the thought has *suddenly* occurred to him, he turns to an attentive waiter. 'Um, *ooh*, I would *love* to take some food to go… If that's alright?'

Oh, Jack… So predictable.

'Of course,' Hannibal replies, hiding his disappointment behind a veil of carefully polite disappointment. He nods to the waiter. 'I'll get one of the staff to get you something from the kitchen.'

'No, no, that's alright,' Jack says, all but screaming it with his body language and sudden grabbing hands. He takes a small plate, greedy eyes on the platter of canapes, as though afraid they'll disappear before he can get them to evidence. 'Just, er, bring me a container and I'll serve myself from here.' He pauses, glancing back at Hannibal, already reaching for the food. 'Um, with your permission, of course, Dr Lecter?'

Bullish as ever, Hannibal thinks. He represses a sigh, subtly shifting his body to allow for Alana to come up and stand beside him, blue eyes sharp as she considers the FBI agent.

‘Hello, Jack.’

‘Hello, Alana,’ Jack says, barely pausing to glance at her before reaching for one of the bird-foot pastries. He lifts it, gesturing to Hannibal. ‘I *do* have your permission, Dr Lecter?’

Alana stares, horrified, at the *suspicion* on Jack’s face. This is *Will’s* delusion, *not* Jack’s…? Surely he’s not thinking…? He doesn’t mean…?

‘Help yourself,’ Hannibal says quietly, dark eyes flitting from Jack’s plate to the waiter’s tray.

‘Thank you,’ Jack says, loading up his evidence pot with one of every delicacy.

Hannibal sighs.

‘Eat it soon, or it’ll spoil.’

‘Because if he waits too long, then the meat spoils.’

Will’s words echo in his mind, and Hannibal is certain he sees a flash of recognition in Jack’s eyes at the phrase.

A second waiter arrives, Tupperware in hand, and Jack deposits everything into the container, shifting under Alana’s angry, disappointed gaze.

‘Thank you,’ he says, nodding for the Beta staff to leave. Smiles at Hannibal, and inclines his head to Alana. ‘Good evening.’

‘Good evening,’ Hannibal says, his shoulders dropping a fraction as Jack walks away.

That was sloppy.

Watching the other Alpha’s retreating back, Hannibal allows the scents of the room to wash over him until he can focus on the heady aroma of *fear*.

Dr Frederick Chilton hovers by a bouquet of white lilies, clutching his silver walking cane as though terrified he is about to stabbed and eaten. Hannibal looks over, watching the way the smaller Alpha squares his shoulder in defiance of the stare, and then he winks.

Oh, Frederick… What plans I have for you. Just as soon as Jack tests his samples.

***

Long after the final guests have gone, and the waiting staff are clearing away lipstick-smeared champagne flutes and marguerite glasses, Alana sits at the harpsichord, resting her aching feet and playing a simple tune that sounds truly atrocious in the quiet room.

Hannibal sits beside her, listening to the way her heart skips a beat at his closeness. He has removed his ascot and blazer now, his scent and cologne thick as the warmth of the evening rises from him. Alana’s blue eyes linger on his bare arms, where he’s rolled up his

shirtsleeves rolled up, before they rise to his lips, his jaw and the blond hair falling over his forehead.

'*Well*,' he teases, grinning at her. 'The ending to my composition has been eluding me, but you may just have solved that problem with "Chopsticks".'

Alana laughs, and plays it again, this time accompanied by lower notes from him. She leans closer, knocking shoulders with him, and Hannibal hears her breath catch when she realizes that he's sitting close enough that their outer thighs are touching. Her scent grows heavy, rising from her in waves, and she wets her lips as though her mouth has gone dry with nerves.

'If only every problem could be solved with a simple waltz,' she mumbles, smiling at him again and then lowering her gaze. Another glance and aversion, submitting to him because he's an Alpha and she's a Beta, her pulse fluttering in her throat as she bares the side of her neck.

That's it, Hannibal thinks, holding himself back, waiting until *just* the right moment. Alana's weakness is her sympathy; she pities him, just as she pitied Will, and he intends to use that to his advantage.

'Jack's treating you like a suspect,' Alana says quietly, a frown creasing her forehead. 'Pointing fingers in the dark.'

Hannibal sighs, gaze lingering on the sheet of music on the harpsichord stand.

He believes he's been given a light.

'I've walked away from Will, but I'm still trailing his accusations,' he says, saying the words he knows she wants to hear. She wants to believe that his relationship with his Omega is over; that although they may still be bonded, Will has made it *very* clear how he feels about Hannibal, and he's not likely to be released anytime soon, giving Hannibal the freedom to be with her, if he chooses.

'I've walked away, too,' Alana murmurs, her gaze lingering on Hannibal's lips. 'I can't forgive Will for what he did to you…' She shakes her head, blinking wet eyes. 'I just wanna walk away from *all* of it.'

'What does walking away leave us?' Hannibal asks softly, dangling the baited hook and waiting.

As predicted, Alana smiles sadly.

'Each other…'

She turns to him, her pupils widening as fresh arousal flushes her skin pink. Hannibal can smell the change in her scent; the sharpness of determination, just before Alana leans in and presses a kiss to his lips.

Yes…

There's a moment where bile stings the back of his throat, but Hannibal swallows it down, ignoring the urge to cringe away from her. He returns the kiss, lifting a hand to cup the back of Alana's head and taking control. He tastes champagne on her breath, which catches at the feel of his lips on her, and the tacky, chemical sharpness of lipstick. He can hear her heartbeat falter, thrumming with excitement in her chest, and the smell of her fills the air between them, thick like caramel and sweet as roses, growing heavier beneath a layer of oaky perfume.

Hannibal notes each assault on his senses, each one battering him in a way that Will's *never* do. He fits perfectly with his Omega, each scent, taste and sound complementing the other, but with Alana everything clashes, and if this wasn't about punishing his mate for letting another Alpha touch him, and about creating an alibi, he wouldn't endure it.

'Hannibal…' Alana breaks the kiss and pulls back, her eyes glassy, staring up into his face. 'Should we… I mean… Is this okay? For you…? I just…'

'Don't worry about me,' Hannibal whispers, smiling at her before capturing her mouth again. Whilst not as severe a reaction as Will must have felt when Matthew touched him – *fucked his mouth* – the feel of a stranger's body against his is deeply unpleasant; like biting ants beneath his flesh, and he is surprised that he hasn't erupted in a rash at the contact.

Despite the discomfort, Hannibal slides his hands through Alana's hair, freeing it of the pins holding it back, using the pressure on her neck to encourage her to press up against him. The proximity crushes her soft breasts against his chest, and Hannibal trails the fingers of his left hand across the ridge of Alana's collarbone, teasing the edge of her dress.

'Would you like some more wine?' he whispers, his eyes glowing burgundy when Alana hums, quivering with excitement, and nods against his lips. She is already quite tipsy, but Hannibal intends to ensure a *thorough* night's sleep, which requires something stronger.

He stands, repressing the urge to wipe his palms down on his trousers, and extends a hand to help her up. Alana giggles and leans against him, her hands sliding over the hard planes of his abdomen, fiddling with the buttons of his shirt but not quite daring to undo them.

'I have an excellent Bordeaux,' Hannibal continues, twining his fingers with hers and leading her towards the stairs. 'And I would *love* to share it with you.'

Another giggle, hot breath against his cheek as Alana kisses along his jaw, leaving behind a stinging trail. Hannibal walks them up to his bedroom, his stomach twisting uncomfortably when he sees Will's side of the bed.

Perhaps this is a bad idea…

You took another Alpha's seed into your body.

Replaying the echo of Will's memory, when he'd pleasured Matthew to ensure his co-operation in attempting to murder him, seen through the haze of their bond, Hannibal sets his jaw and leaves Alana to perch on the edge of his blue and white silk bed. He sets his guilt

aside and walks to the dresser, tapping the button on his music player and filling the room with the soft, lilting piano notes of Bach.

‘I wanted to thank you, for the dress,’ Alana says, watching the shirt move across Hannibal’s back as he pours two glasses of wine. He’s clearly nervous, and so is she; they’ve been teetering on the edge of this for years, and this is Hannibal’s first since Will betrayed him.

Hannibal smiles to himself, surreptitiously adding a sedative gel to the rim of Alana’s glass before turning around to face her again.

‘The pleasure was mine,’ he purrs, holding out the crystal goblet. ‘I’m honored you trusted my taste.’

‘Of course,’ Alana replies, taking the drink with a smile. ‘Easy enough when you always look impeccable.’

‘Thank you.’ Hannibal inclines his head and lifts his glass, ready to toast. Alana stands, closing the distance between them, and holds his gaze, her blue eyes snapping fire where they meet his obsidian depths.

‘To letting go,’ she murmurs, lifting the glass to her lips and taking a long, pointed drink.

Hannibal swallows, his chest almost too tight to breathe. He cannot let himself think of Will now; if he senses their bond, if he gives his Omega even a *hint* of what is about to happen…

I haven’t let go, mylimasis… I have no intention of letting go… I promise you.

‘To whatever comes next,’ he murmurs, taking a sip of his own wine.

Alana’s grin spreads, and she looks up through her lashes at him before turning away, swaying her hips as the alcohol lends courage to her movements. As Hannibal watches, she sets her glass down on Will’s side table and then faces him squarely, lifting her hands to the buttons securing the front of her wrap dress, chewing on her lower lip as long fingers pull the soft fabric from the navy lace of her bra.

The fabric slides across her skin to pool, unwanted, at her feet, and Hannibal washes away the bitterness of regret from his mouth with another taste of Bordeaux.

Alana steps away from the dress, her calves firm as she balances in her black heels, diamond bracelet glinting in the lamplight when she runs her thumbs over the edge of her lace panties.

‘I think I have a pretty good idea what’s coming next,’ she murmurs, dipping her head towards the bed. ‘Don’t you?’

Hannibal smiles, and sets his wine aside. He unbuttons his shirt, allowing it to fall to the floor before taking Alana into his arms. Even wearing heels, she has to tilt her head back and reach to kiss him, and Hannibal guides her with a hand on the small of her back, turning her around until the back of her knees hit the bed.

Alana sits, her heart racing and lips tingling. She lies back, grinning when Hannibal removes her shoes, and then reaches up to wrap her arms around him as he crawls on top of her, parting her legs with his hips and settling his weight on her.

Heat pools and the rub of lace against her sensitive flesh sends pleasure zinging up her spine. Another kiss captures her breathy moan of longing, and Alana rubs the palms of her hands up and down the trembling muscles of Hannibal's shoulders, certain she's burning him with how hot she feels.

Rocking his pelvis, Hannibal concentrates on the feel of a nipple stiffening under his hand as he cups the mound of Alana's breast. He can feel the first stirrings of arousal and he commits himself to the flickering sensations her questing tongue and roving hands elicit.

Will's pain is going to be exquisite.

The idea of his mate's reaction, the *fury* on his Omega's face, the *revenge* he will exact, stokes his fire, and Hannibal hears a purr rumble in his throat even as he nuzzles at the creamy column of Alana's throat, settling his teeth over the pulse thundering just beneath the skin.

He'll be so angry with me… He may even try to hurt me again.

Alana arches her back into Hannibal's touch, biting her lip as the Alpha pushes her bra aside and rolls her nipple between forefinger and thumb. She huffs a laugh when he lowers his mouth to the offering, nipping with sharp teeth and then sucking, each flick of his tongue a dull echo of what he could be doing between her legs.

'Hannibal…'

He might even make me bleed again, Hannibal thinks, compartmentalizing his current situation with Alana and his fantasy reunion with Will. He needs Alana to think that he is present for this, but he has the ability to feign interest even when in his mind palace.

He unhooks the clasps of her bra and pulls the lacy material from Alana's body, dropping it off the end of the bed and lavishing equal affections on both breasts. Alana hums her encouragement, her hands constantly moving through his hair, across his chest and down his arms, marveling at the lean muscles beneath his golden skin.

When Hannibal starts to kiss a trail down her stomach, Alana's throat tightens and she squirms, a sudden spark of desire soaking her panties. Her hands fall to either side of her body, clutching fistfuls of the silk and velvet quilt, and her eyes flutter closed as Hannibal kneels next to the bed, still between her legs, and tugging her underwear down her thighs.

'*Hannibal…'*

'You smell incredible, Alana,' Hannibal whispers, brushing his lips back and forth over the satin-soft skin of her inner thighs. He reaches up under her and grabs two handfuls of her buttocks, hauling her right to the edge of the mattress, and silences her yelp by nuzzling at the thin line of dark pubic hair. 'I want to know how you taste.'

‘Oh *God,*’ Alana groans, flinging a hand over her eyes and blushing furiously. She blows out her breath, her stomach fluttering, and then Hannibal’s hot breath is there, and he’s *kissing* her *there*, and all her focus shrinks to the feel of lips and *tongue* lapping at the swollen, tender flesh, sparking flames that make her toes curl.

Hannibal pulls one of Alana’s legs over his shoulder, wrapping his arm around her thigh, and reaches under his chin with the other, coating his fingers with slippery wetness and teasing her with the idea of slipping them inside. Alana bucks, moaning at the sensations he is wringing from her body, and Hannibal smirks at the idea of Will’s reaction to knowing that he has his own mouth wrapped around another person’s genitalia.

Quid pro quo, mylimasis.

Feeling Hannibal smile against her, proud of himself as he pleasures her, Alana realizes that she’s already closer to climax than she’d thought she would be. Hannibal’s forefinger slides inside her without resistance, and she gasps as she clenches around him, rocking up onto the steady rasp of his tongue against her, her cheeks still bright red from the purrs and licking sounds coming from between her legs.

Hannibal slips another finger inside Alana’s body, crooking the knuckles and pulling at the nub of skin just beneath her pelvis. Alana’s muscles tighten, drawing him further up as he hits *that* spot. She shudders, her forehead glistening with a thin sheen of sweat, breasts heaving and nipples darkening in response to the orgasm evidently drawing nearer. He continues his ministrations, alternating the brush of his fingers with the swirl of his tongue, and Alana’s scent grows thicker, muskier, even as she begins to buck rhythmically into his mouth.

‘Hannibal… Hannibal…’

Focusing on the white fire rising in waves through her body, Alana abandons herself to chasing her pleasure. She reaches for him, gripping Hannibal’s hair tight, and rolls her hips down onto his fingers before pushing up towards his mouth, again and again, fucking herself on him. And Hannibal obliges her, purring like a tiger, moving faster now as her muscles start to tighten and everything gets very hazy. It’s good, it’s so, *so* good, and then it’s there, it’s *right there*, and it’s crashing into her like a storm.

Alana clenches her teeth, her eyes screwed tight shut as colors explode behind her eyelids, head flung back and hands abandoning Hannibal’s hair to grip her own as she comes hard. Her heart races, carrying the pleasure-soaked blood around her body until she’s an inferno of golden light, the focal point of which is the crackling white lightning deep inside her and beneath Hannibal’s tongue.

‘*God, fuck!’*

Ignoring the expletives, Hannibal presses one final kiss to Alana’s twitching clitoris and eases his fingers free of her pulsing body, grinning up at her as she stares, wrecked, at the ceiling.

‘You taste *divine*,’ he murmurs, watching as she trembles in the aftermath.

Light as air, Alana gives Hannibal a dopey smile and then sits up, reaching for him and pulling him on top of her again. The rasp of his pant-covered erection against her over-sensitive skin has her giggling and shying away, but she can smell herself all over his face, and the taste of her own musk on his lips, the glistening *wetness* of it as she kisses him, sends a wave fresh desire coursing through her. She fumbles to undo Hannibal's belt and zipper, hunger gnawing at her as he starts to help. Together they manage to shove the dark pants and boxers down his legs, and the silky weight of his erection against her stomach, leaving a trail of precum on her skin, makes pleasure spike again.

Dragged down by Alana's desperate hands, Hannibal loses himself to the feel of her tongue on his, the press of her soft breasts against his pectorals and the burning, welcoming heat as she wraps her legs around his waist. Hannibal revels in his own hardness, enjoying the ache, reminded that Will denied him his release when he visited. He groans, breaking the kiss to stand up and kick off his shoes, socks and pants, using the opportunity to pull open the drawer of the side table and remove a condom.

Sweat trickles down Alana's chest and she wipes it away as she props herself up on her elbows, her hair disheveled and eyeliner smudged. Grinning at him, she beckons for the foil packet and rips it open with her teeth when Hannibal gives it to her, holding his gaze as she rolls it onto his quivering length.

'I want you to come inside me,' she whispers, taking him by the hand and pulling him back on top of her. 'I want you to knot me.'

'Alana…' Hannibal hesitates, resting his weight up so that he doesn't crush her and frowning down at her. Alana kisses him again, petting his jaw, and nods.

'It's okay,' she promises. 'I can take it. I *want* it.'

She nods again as Hannibal reaches down to align himself, and adjusts her hips as he starts to push inside her. He's big, and the stretch is uncomfortable, but knowing that it's *him*, that it's *them* and they're *together* makes it worth it, and she breathes slowly, pushing out and then clenching up as he moves within her.

'God, Hannibal, you feel so good,' she breathes, squeezing his waist with her thighs and shuddering again when he gets all the way inside her, filling her so completely that it *aches*, but also rubs against her. There's fire in her veins, there must be, with how hot she's burning, and everything's tight and *good*, sparking within her with every one of Hannibal's powerful thrusts.

Many people think of intercourse with a male Omega and a woman as the same, but now that he has been with Will, Hannibal knows that they are *nothing* alike. Where Will is the perfect fit, with his tingling slick burning him alive, his sweet musk soothing and stoking Hannibal's passion, even as he makes all the right sounds to make him *throb,* Alana moves at a different pace and her body isn't suited to his. Snapping his hips, Hannibal can see when she winces, struggling to adjust to his length and girth, so he withdraws slightly and focuses on creating a glassy expression on her face.

This isn't about his pleasure, anyway.

After Hannibal shifts, Alana finds that she can't catch her breath. The way the man moves is *so* right, *so* good, catching the tender spot inside her even as his pelvis roll brings them flush together. She can hear herself moaning again, chanting his name under her breath, but she can't make herself stop, and her vision is starting to blur at how *sharp* the pleasure is.

Hannibal feels the moment Alana reaches her climax again, crushing him as her body spasms around him. The heel of her right foot digs into his spine, holding him impossibly closer, and she bares her throat as she stares, sightless, at the ceiling. Hannibal imagines sinking his teeth into her windpipe, tearing it out in an arterial spray of crimson. Imagines how hot her blood would be on his skin, how it would run down to stain his pores…

How it would look if Will were here with him, tearing great chunks from her body.

Alana laughs as she feels Hannibal's hips snap, spilling his release into the condom. She strokes his hair again, hugging him close, sweating and out of breath, dizzy with the high. Everything is so soft and warm, and she can feel herself drifting on a natural high, getting sleepy from the wine and endorphins.

Hannibal slips free of Alana before his knot can lock them together, watching as the swelling quickly deflates in the cool air. His gut tightens and, to his surprise, he feels his heart skip a beat as his eyes burn.

He misses Will.

Giving his head a sharp shake, he tries to clear his mind of the melancholy thoughts, hurrying to the bathroom to dispose of the used condom and brush his teeth.

Alana is already asleep when he returns. She sprawls on the covers, her lips curving into a satisfied smile, pulse still racing in her throat even as her breathing slows.

She is quite adorable, really.

Hannibal sighs to himself, absently rubbing his hands together to shed the scent of her, and fetches a pair of burgundy pajama trousers from the dresser. As close as they have just been, he is unwilling to remain naked beside her, the way he sleeps with Will.

You're not my mate, and you're not my equal.

However, he needs Alana to believe that he enjoyed himself as much as she did, so he cradles her close and maneuvers her until she is under the covers on Will's side of the bed. Alana mumbles something and rolls over, curling around her naked body, her head enveloped in the soft feathers of the pillow. She reaches for him as Hannibal turns off the light and he lies down beside her, smiling when Alana muzzily opens her eyes, her pupils wide and fixed.

'Tha' w's *incredible*,' Alana mumbles, losing the battle with her eyelids and snuggling further into the pillow. '*You're* incredible.'

'You're a very beautiful woman, Alana,' Hannibal breathes, tracing the curve of her jawline. 'You're exhausted me.'

Alana gives a happy little hum, finally surrendering to the effects of the sedative, and at last falls silent, her breathing becoming deep and even. To be safe, Hannibal closes his eyes, withdrawing to the village church of Santa Reparata and the Devil's Armor hanging high on the wall there as he feigns sleep.

He is a patient man, and what he has planned for the night ahead is worth the wait.

As the hour ticks by, Hannibal sits in the church pew, watching the way the changing light slanting through the high windows catches dust motes in the still and silent air. In this place, he has no need of the fishhook and package of passports, cash and keys hanging inside the cuirass of the real armor, right where the heart would be, but they are there, waiting safely for him, if he ever has need of them.

Only when his grandfather clock distantly chimes midnight does Hannibal open his eyes, excitement coiling in his gut at the idea of what's to come.

A hunter's thrill.

He reaches out, clicking his fingers above Alana's ear to be sure of her slumber.

She doesn't stir.

Perfect.

Rising from the bed, he collects a tissue from his table and moves on silent feet to Will's side of the bed. Hannibal keeps one eye on Alana's sleeping form as he wipes the rim of her glass, and then he lifts the comforter higher, tucking it up over her shoulder to keep her warm, before leaving the room.

He has a lot to do before dawn.

***

Dr Abel Gideon has always been a light sleeper. Some of it's an Alpha thing; he read somewhere, a long time ago, that prime Alphas, especially thoroughbreds like him, are prone to wake at every little noise because it's a survival mechanism. The ability to protect a slumbering mate and children.

His own mate had always kept him awake with her snoring. It was one of the many reasons why he'd killed her.

Now, despite the pain lingering on the edge of his mind, Abel finds himself enjoying the peace and quiet that the solitude of the ICU brings, able to doze even through the blips of the monitors around him. Having been thrown from the stairwell at the BSHCI by two rogue guards to land on the metal roof of the security room, he has been transferred to the local hospital, and the only thing reminding him of his status as a prisoner is the guard outside.

He's not even wearing handcuffs anymore.

A clatter has his eyes springing open in an instant. He scents the air, tasting the salt of fear and a bittersweet tang of pain.

He's here.

A shadow moves on the other side of the curtains, the barest breeze making them flutter. Abel tracks the movement with crimson-ringed eyes, his heart beating a little faster and his stomach tightening in anticipation.

There's no sound; the Ripper is a true predator, moving on silent feet, and Abel feels fear nibbling like rats at his insides. The bastard is prolonging his wait, drawing out the reveal, *just* to make him nervous.

Well, it's working…

The silhouette of an arm reaches for the gap in the curtains, and then a gloved hand appears, slim fingers plucking at the cream material, revealing a tall, broad-shouldered man dressed in surgeon's scrubs.

Hannibal Lecter's maroon eyes glint above the paper mask obscuring his face. He sees Abel's throat constrict as the wounded Alpha swallows, and then he pulls the mask down to smile at him.

It is cold smile, promising violence, rewarded with a shiver from the other man.

He has been terribly rude, after all.

'Hello, Dr Gideon.'

***

At six o'clock the next morning, Jack Crawford walks into the ICU room of missing patient, Dr Abel Gideon. FBI agents, forensic officers and local cops are already there, having secured the scene an hour ago, but Jack needs to be the one to identify the victim for what it is.

A Chesapeake Ripper tableau.

He takes a breath, ignoring the stench of putrid remains, and pulls back the curtains.

A guard hangs over the empty hospital bed, strung up with over two dozen fishing lines, each hook embedded deep into the skin of his back. His abdomen has been sliced open and his intestines lie in a coiled heap on the bed, a nicked bowel releasing the stink of feces into the air.

His badge has been positioned in pride of place on the guts, his radio dangling beside it.

Zeller bends over the bed and peers up through the ribs.

‘Put a heart monitor on the guard so no one knew Gideon was missing,’ he says, pointing to the chest cavity. ‘At least as long as it took for the guard to die, which wasn’t long.’

‘It was long enough,’ Jack mutters, mirroring his stance, his burgundy eyes resting on the ashen face of the dead Beta. He’d never stood a chance against the Chesapeake Ripper.

Against Hannibal Lecter.

‘He was string up with *fish-hooks*,’ Price says, nodding to the torn and puckered flesh in front of him. ‘Hand-tied *flies*, just like Will Graham used to make.’

Jack frowns, peering closer at the suspension method.

‘*This* one,’ Price continues, gesturing with a pair of tweezers. ‘Has a human hair in it, and a *tooth*.’

‘Jack,’ Zeller says, drawing his boss back down to talk to him under the hole in the guard’s body. ‘There is *no way* Gideon could’ve done *any* of this with the injuries he had, much less get out of *bed*.’

‘Well, the last time Gideon escaped custody, he went looking for the Chesapeake Ripper,’ Jack replies. ‘He found him alright.’

Sighing, he straightens up and frowns at the lures once again.

‘Last night… the Ripper found Gideon.’

He turns away, his heart skipping a beat.

‘Where are you going?’ Price asks, resuming his photography of the scene.

‘There’s someone I need to see,’ Jack calls, striding from the room. ‘I’ll be back later. Keep working.’

***

The next part of his plan should come into effect soon, and Hannibal dozes beside Alana as sunlight wakes the birds outside and lights up the room, conserving his energy for the day ahead. He senses the sedative wearing off, imagining Alana’s eyes rolling from side to side beneath her eyelids, dreams replacing the endless black, growing more cohesive but less engaging as sleep fades, and hears when her breath catches and she wakes.

Alana comes back to herself slowly, warm and ridiculously comfortable, wrapped in expensive sheets and a silk-lined quilt. The smell of Hannibal’s thick, Alpha musk, laundry detergent and cedarwood cologne fills her nose, and she smiles as memories of last night return. The party, the champagne, flirting with Hannibal at his harpsichord, and then coming to bed with him, and being *thoroughly* spoiled by the man…

She clenches, enjoying the tenderness inside her.

Hannibal really is an *exquisite* lover.

She takes a deep breath and then sighs, content to just lie there and not *think* for the first time in her life. She doesn't regret a single thing; as much as her confidence had been fueled by wine, she's glad she had sex with Hannibal.

Rolling her head to the side, she watches the Alpha sleeping beside her. Hannibal's features have softened in sleep, and his blond hair falls over his forehead, making him look younger and more vulnerable.

How could Will have treated him so badly?

If Hannibal were *her* mate, she knew she'd do everything in her power to protect and cherish him. Not go around vilifying him to anyone who'd listen.

Hannibal allows her to gaze at him for a moment and then opens his eyes, crimson irises fading to obsidian because there is no joy in him at the sight of her.

Alana smiles, feeling her cheeks warm at the memory of him on top of her, *inside* her, last night.

'You're awake,' she murmurs, her eyes sparkling.

'So are you,' Hannibal replies, offering her a small smile in return, listening to their breath whistling in and out of their noses, and the low thud of their hearts beating out of sync.

'I was thinking about funerals and how often they make us want sex,' Alana says. Hannibal grins, rubbing his scent further into his pillow, ignoring the chafing, nagging feeling of needles under his skin.

'It's one in the eye for death,' he agrees, quirking an eyebrow at her, but Alana's smile fades and she chews her lower lip.

'Not that… This wasn't *funeral* sex, or…' She hesitates, concerned she's offended him.

'Of course it was,' Hannibal says, and Alana looks up quickly as he continues, 'We both just buried a loved one. We buried Will.'

The man that he was… Innocent of violence. Now, though, he can rise as his true self. A phoenix from the ashes of despair.

Alana is quiet for a moment, before her expression hardens, her blue eyes growing cold.

'There's something liberating about finally letting him go,' she says, her words cutting at Hannibal's heart. He shifts, swallowing the lump in his throat, and buries his emotions for Will deep beneath a layer of ice. Burying their bond as deep within him as it can go, protecting it from the world and all its hatred.

'Yes,' he lies. 'There is.'

Sighing, he leans closer and strokes Alana's hair as he dips his head to kiss her again. It doesn't hurt as much, now, though her suddenly thickening scent does nothing for him. Will is the only one able to make him *feel* something.

Perhaps it was never only about manipulating him, he thinks, comparing the inferno of his passion towards his Omega to the cool indifference he feels now, with Alana.

'We have a lot of reasons to do this,' he says, stroking her hair again. He needs Alana on his side now, more than ever, and sex is the most convenient method for that. 'Not just funeral reasons.'

Alana's breath catches, and excitement brings a darker blush to her cheeks before she rolls towards Hannibal, arching up to press her breasts against the flat, hard muscles of his chest, claiming his mouth in a hungry kiss. She wraps her arms around him, massaging his shoulder, *aching* to feel him inside her again –

The distant chiming of his front doorbell has them both pull apart with a groan, and Hannibal rolls his eyes.

'Last time someone rang my doorbell this early, it was a census taker.'

A rude little man, though his liver was in perfect condition.

Alana smiles, encouraging him to ignore whoever is disturbing them, and Hannibal purrs as he grins at her, stroking her cheek with the back of his hand.

Before they can do more than brush noses, the doorbell chimes again. Hannibal sighs, and begins to withdraw.

'I'll see who it is,' he says, climbing out of bed, clad once more in pajama pants. Alana settles onto her back again, watching as Hannibal grabs a red sweater on his way past the Samurai armor stood in pride of place at the entrance to the room. She hums to herself, stroking a hand across the soft sheets, and tracks the excitement flickering through her veins at what's going to happen when he comes back.

Padding barefoot across the cold marble of his foyer, Hannibal unlocks the front door and pulls it towards him, stepping back as Jack enters without waiting for an invitation. The other Alpha is bundled up against the cold, his hands in his coat pockets, the flaps turned up high over his neck. His jaw is set, and his body language is distinctly hostile.

'Jack,' Hannibal says, permitting the invasion.

'Hannibal.'

Jack stares straight at him, and Hannibal paints a look of polite curiosity into the curve of his eyebrows.

'What can I do for you?' he asks, enjoying the way a vein begins to throb in Jack's temple.

‘We need to talk,’ Jack growls, walking ahead into the entrance hall. Hannibal smirks, and saunters after him, schooling his face to calm neutrality when Jack turns to him and continues, ‘Abel Gideon fell down a stairwell last night. He was hospitalized. The security guard standing watch has been killed, in what *appears* to be another Chesapeake Ripper murder. Gideon is nowhere to be found.’

Hannibal frowns.

‘He escaped?’

‘We know he didn’t leave the hospital on his own,’ Jack growls. ‘His back was broken. He was *taken*. By *someone*. Someone who knew him.’

Here it comes…

Jack nods to him.

‘Where were you last night?’

Oh, Jack. And here I thought we were friends.

Hannibal allows his sorrow to warm his eyes to burgundy, drawing his eyebrows in to crease his forehead.

‘I was here,’ he says quietly.

Jack’s eyes flicker crimson.

‘All night?’

‘Yes.’

Chewing his tongue, Jack raises an eyebrow.

‘Anyone other than yourself that can verify that?’ he asks, and Hannibal continues to look at him, hurt by the implied accusation, until Alana’s voice rings out from the doorway at the bottom of the stairs.

‘I can.’

Hannibal glances over as Jack turns, clearly shocked to see the Beta dressed only in Hannibal’s white shirt from last night, her arms folded across her chest and bare legs out.

‘I was with Hannibal all night, Jack,’ Alana says, her hair still tousled and lips flushed.

Hannibal smells the blood rise in Jack’s cheeks, and then the other Alpha turns back to him, looking confused. After all, everyone knows that Hannibal is bonded to Will.

Looking down, Hannibal wet his lips, his hands twitching into fists hidden in his pajama pockets. He isn’t proud of his actions, and he shows it.

Everybody gets lonely, Jack.

‘What are you accusing him of?’ Alana demands, and Jack turns back with a warning growl.

‘I’m not accusing him of anything,’ he says. ‘Only asking his whereabouts.’

He looks at Hannibal as he says this, nodding as though silently pleading for the other Alpha to side with him against Alana’s protective rage.

Hannibal has no intention of helping him ever again.

‘That’s not all you’re asking,’ he says sadly. His eyes bore deep into Jack’s face, laying the other man bare, and then he sighs, and shakes his head. Turning, he walks back to the door and tugs it open, allowing a gust of wintry air into the house. ‘If you don’t mind? I was about to make breakfast for Alana and myself.’

‘Of course.’ Jack’s jaw is still tight as he accepts the dismissal, and he is careful not to look at Alana again as he leaves the house. ‘Have a nice day.’

Hannibal watches him climb into his car and reverse out of the driveway, feeling Alana come up behind him and drape her arms around his waist. The Beta stretches up onto her tiptoes and rests her chin on his shoulder, pressing her body flush to Hannibal’s back as she glares after the other Alpha.

‘Jack’s so desperate to catch the Ripper, he’ll accuse *anyone*,’ she says, hugging him tight. ‘He shouldn’t listen to anything Will says; he’s trying to poison him against you.’

‘It seems to be working,’ Hannibal murmurs. He twines their fingers together and lifts Alana’s hands up to drop kisses along her knuckles, keeping the mood somber. ‘Jack came here before anywhere else.’

Alana growls and tugs him around, leaning up and kissing him fiercely as if to undo the damage Jack has done to their good mood with his accusations.

‘You’re a good man, Hannibal,’ she whispers, pressing the words into his mouth. ‘Jack doesn’t know what he’s talking about.’

‘Thank you for defending me,’ Hannibal replies, cupping her cheek. ‘You didn’t have to do that.’

Alana smiles, shaking her head at him.

‘I’m not embarrassed about what we did,’ she says. ‘And there was no way I was going to let him treat you like that.’

Hannibal hums, and gives her a final, lingering kiss before heading towards the kitchen.

‘Would you like some breakfast?’ he asks, creating the impression that he is seeking a distraction from his hurt feelings.

Alana trails after him, swallowing her frustration under a layer of sympathy, nodding and giving him his space instead of pushing for more sex. Manipulating the kind is always easy.

‘Sure,’ she says, leaning down on the counter as Hannibal adds two scoops of ground coffee to his espresso machine. ‘I think we worked up a pretty good appetite.’

Hannibal graces her with one of her favorite crooked smiles, looking up through the hair falling over his face.

‘We certainly did,’ he agrees. He allows the silence to fall between them, empty from him but thick with excitement from Alana, and busies himself making drinks. When he hands Alana’s to her, he is painfully reminded of the first time Will slept over, and how adorably nervous the man had been come morning.

He frowns, tapping his fingers on the side of his cup.

‘I’d like to be the one to tell Will,’ he says. ‘There’s a lot we need to discuss.’

‘Of course.’ Alana nods and sips her coffee, cradling the glass mug between her hands to warm them up. ‘I mean, I don’t know exactly what it’s *like*, to be bonded… Betas can’t, y’know? Not really…’ She huffs and rolls her eyes. ‘Some call us “neutral ground”, as if Alphas and Omegas are at war with each other.’

‘It can feel as though we are,’ Hannibal says, stirring in a sugar and wondering if Will is going to be given anything to add to *his* coffee this morning. After all, Hannibal submitted a request to Dr Chilton weeks ago, advising of his Omega’s sweet tooth. ‘All those raging hormones and inconvenient instincts.’ He raises his cup to toast her. ‘To your “neutral ground”.’

Alana chuckles, and drinks her coffee. She sighs, licking her lips, and then sets it aside.

‘My dad used to say I should’ve been born Alpha,’ she murmurs, toying with the handles of Hannibal’s knives in the block beside her. ‘Too stubborn and willful to be a Beta.’

‘Perhaps he was right,’ Hannibal replies, grinning at her. ‘Perhaps you are a late bloomer.’

‘Hah, I see what you did there.’ Alana smirks and wags a finger at him as Hannibal winks at her for the pun. She settles back to drink her coffee, shifting out of the way when he collects sausages from the refrigerator, her blue eyes sharp with admiration as she watches him prepare breakfast.

He has the grace of a dancer; each step is precise, each move calculated. If she didn’t know him so well, his unerring balance and the innate *predatory* nature of his stance would intimidate her. As it is, he’s everything an Alpha *should* be.

‘So… are you busy this evening?’ she asks, finally plucking up the courage to ask him the question perched on her tongue for the last twenty minutes.

Hannibal grimaces, pouring frothy whisked eggs into the puff pastry basin in his skillet.

‘I’m having a colleague for dinner,’ he replies, setting the dirty bowl into the sink. ‘He’s recently returned to the city and we have *much* to talk about.’

Alana hides her disappointment well, nodding her understanding without pressing the matter. Hannibal turns to her and captures both of her hands in his, lifting them once more to kiss her fingertips.

‘However, I would like to see you tomorrow, if you’re free.’

Alana’s smile lights up her face, and she nods, blushing a delicate shade of pink before leaning up to kiss him again.

‘I would love that.’

Hannibal forces a purr up from his chest and grins when Alana finally stops capturing his lips with her own. He reaches out to play with her hair, winding a dark curl around his finger and bringing it to his nose to capture the scent of her.

‘It’s a date, then.’

***

Once Alana has gone, Hannibal retreats to the shower to scrub away the lingering stink of her perfume and her cloying scent, tilting his face up to the hot spray until it batters his eyelids and stings his nose.

He squeezes out a generous helping of shampoo, lathering it into his hair and then rubbing it over his body, covering himself in suds until he only smells of *him*.

Why was his revenge not as satisfying? Surely the knowledge of punishing his mate should be enough to satisfy him? Instead, he feels… hollow. Uncertain, as though he regrets the decision.

Perhaps it will be better once Will knows what he’s done. When Hannibal can *see* his pain and anger…?

When they even once again.

Huffing to himself, Hannibal rinses the soap away and then stands for a long time under water, letting the heat soak into his tight muscles. The pieces are in motion, and his game is playing out just as expected.

Another day or so, and Will can come home.

We can be together again.

In the meantime, he has a *very* special dinner to prepare.

***

The slab of boneless meat hits the wooden butcher's block with a thud, and Hannibal grins at the idea of his guest flinching at the sound. Anticipation is part of the thrill of dinner, after all.

Opening it out, skin side down, Hannibal rubs salt and pepper into the flesh, before scooping the garlic and herb-roasted vegetables from the dish beside him and layering them in the middle of the cut.

Then, he folds it over and ties it with string, smoothing over strips of pancetta before sealing it all inside a large leaf, which he covers with clay. The intricate vines and leaves for decoration leave his forearms aching from overuse, but the effect as it cooks, turning from muddy brown to a light ashen color as the clay hardens is worth the pain, and Hannibal grins proudly as he carries the cooked joint through into the dining room, his mouth watering and stomach already growling with hunger.

'Rôti de cuisse,' he says, setting the platter down between the two place settings. 'Clay-roasted thigh *and* canoe-cut marrowbone.'

Dr Abel Gideon sits very still at the head of the table, his cheeks pale and eyes glowing a dull red as he stares straight ahead. Dressed in a navy bathrobe, cotton t-shirt and pajama trousers, he looks every inch the frail old Alpha that he is, hooked up to an IV bag of morphine to keep his pain at bay.

Hannibal removes the decorative flowers and uses a pestle to crack open the clay, releasing the aroma of cooked meat into the air.

'I *love* cooking with clay,' Hannibal continues, peeling the shards away. 'Creates a more *succulent* dish, and adds a little *theatricality* to dinner.'

Abel glances at him, swallows and then resumes staring at the far wall.

'We come from clay, return to clay,' Hannibal murmurs, feeling his own eyes prickle red as he leans over to pick up the knife and fork. 'Shall I carve?'

'I think you already *have*,' Abel replies, barely disguised hatred on his face when he looks at him, the fingers of his left hand brushing the bandages scant inches above the stump where his leg used to be. Until this afternoon.

Until *Hannibal* cut it off.

'Your legs are no good to you anymore,' Hannibal says calmly. 'You've got a T4 fracture of the vertebrae. *This*-' He begins to carve off thin slices of meat. 'Is a *far* more practical use for those limbs.'

As he places the first cut onto Abel's plate, the other Alpha takes a breath and says,

'Hard to *have* anything, isn't it, Dr Lecter?'

Hannibal glances at him, curious as to his statement. Abel sighs.

‘Rare to get it, hard to *keep* it… A damn slippery life.’

Ah. Self-pity. Quite typical amongst his victims. Hannibal undoes the button of his suit jacket, a light grey checked number with a plum-colored silk tie, and takes his seat near to the herb-planters along the wall separating the dining room from the kitchen.

‘You were determined to know the Chesapeake Ripper, Dr Gideon,’ he says, picking up his knife and fork. ‘Now is your opportunity.’

Abel frowns, perplexed.

‘You intend *me* to my own last supper?’

Hannibal holds his gaze, neither smiling nor frowning. There is a quiet satisfaction to this; he will take great pleasure in his victory, but there is no need to rush.

He has days with Gideon, after all.

‘Yes.’

Abel stares, clearly considering his answer, and then looks at the ceiling.

‘How does one politely refuse a dish in circumstances such as these?’ he asks, and Hannibal allows a single growl to rumble in his throat, accompanied by a flicker of crimson in his eyes, before abruptly turning to his plate.

‘One doesn’t.’ He cuts off a smaller piece of meat as he continues, ‘The tragedy is not to die, Abel, but to be wasted.’

Lifting his fork, Hannibal considers the offering before him, listening intently for the stumble in Abel’s heartbeat and the stink of fear-soaked rut to rise from the other Alpha. The moment Gideon’s breath falters, Hannibal locks eyes with him and puts the flesh into his mouth.

Gideon gulps back a whine, his bladder dangerously close to emptying itself at the *blankness* in Dr Lecter’s eyes. He is staring into the face of the devil, and now he must sup with him.

With numb, trembling hands, Abel hacks off a piece of meat – *pork, pretend it’s pork* – and, before he can hesitate any longer, eats it.

He chews, bile stinging the back of his throat and his stomach roiling, mind screaming in a blind panic because *it’s not pork, it’s my own leg, it’s me, it’s human flesh, I’m eating myself* and then…

He swallows.

Fuck.

Hannibal is going to torture and kill him really fucking slowly.

He wishes Will Graham had been a better shot.

‘My compliments to the chef,’ he whispers, setting the fork down because there is absolutely no way he can eat another mouthful.

Hannibal smiles, inclining his head in thanks, and returns to his own meal.

‘Tell me; what did you and Will Graham talk about, during your time together?’ he asks, wiping sauce onto his second forkful of meat.

‘You, of course,’ Abel replies, toying with his own cutlery to keep his hands from shaking. ‘Will spent a great deal of time trying to convince me to betray you.’

‘And yet here you are,’ Hannibal says, dipping his nose to his glass of Riesling and gathering up the crisp scent before taking a sip. The cold white perfectly complements the pork, cleansing his palate after every bite. ‘Did he seem well?’

Abel shrugs.

‘As well as can be expected, given his condition,’ he says. He starts picking at his salad garnish, replacing the bitter flavor of his own *leg* with a pop of piccolo tomato. ‘He misses you; whether he *wants* to or not.’ He gives Hannibal a sly smile. ‘Have you two made up after your little tiff, yet? Will certainly came back to his cell more *relaxed* after your last visit.’

‘Don’t be crude, Abel,’ Hannibal warns, quirking an eyebrow at him. ‘We wouldn’t want to have to quiet your tongue, would we?’

‘Not yet, anyway,’ Abel mutters, gulping wine. He sighs. ‘Why do you do it?’

Hannibal sighs, and sets his cutlery down.

‘Do what?’

‘Kill people. Eat them. Have Will *Graham* as a mate. Pick one. Pick all of them.’ Abel twists thin lettuce leaves around the tines of his fork and then eats them; the first time in his life he’s foregone meat for *vegetables*. ‘Seems rather a *laborious* pastime, if you ask me. And yes, I am referring to all of them.’

Hannibal tilts his head, considering Abel coldly. Will is hardly a *pastime*.

‘Are you trying to get under my skin?’ he asks, rewarded with a wobbly smirk from the other man.

‘Well, you did get under *mine*,’ Abel replies, gesturing to the roasted joint far too close to his elbow for comfort. ‘Got under Will Graham’s too, if memory serves.’

‘You’re quite fond of riddles, aren’t you?’ Hannibal says, resuming eating. ‘Why is that?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Broken childhood. Abusive mother, alcoholic father, lack of attention,’ Abel says, reeling off his answers like a bored student in an exam. ‘I deflect.’

‘As do I,’ Hannibal agrees, eyeing his final piece of meat before letting it melt onto his tongue. ‘Mm.’

‘You never answered my question,’ Abel says, picking around the meat on his plate. ‘Why kill? Why eat us?’

‘I like it,’ Hannibal says, staring at him and freezing him in place. ‘I would explain further, Abel, but I doubt you would understand.’

Only Will understands me. He’s the only one capable of empathizing with me.

Abel narrows his eyes as Dr Lecter’s expression softens, and he nods slowly.

‘Oh, I get it,’ he murmurs. ‘Why you chose Will, I mean… You think *he* accepts you. That, for all his struggles, he is as drawn to your darkness as you are drawn to his light.’ He shakes his head, raising his eyebrows in awe. ‘I must say, it could be an impressive match; *if* you’re right.’

‘I am,’ Hannibal says, lightly and dangerously.

Abel shrugs again.

‘What happens if you’re not?’ he says. ‘If he keeps rejecting you? If he tries to kill you again, or, even worse, turns you in?’

‘He won’t do that,’ Hannibal replies, injecting more confidence than he feels into his voice. ‘He has every reason to stay with me. To keep me happy.’

‘Hm…’ Abel smirks, his eyes flickering between blue and red. ‘Well, *I’m* hardly the best person to ask for mating advice,’ he drawls. ‘But I *do* find that giving them something to look after is usually a good distraction.’ He spreads his hands. ‘Have you considered children?’

Hannibal drinks the last of his wine in lieu of responding, and Abel grins.

‘Where would they live?’ he continues. ‘Will’s told me *all* about his home in the country… Would they stay with him? He *would* be their father… or would you call him their mother? I’m never sure with that term… I think it depends on the individual. Oh, and *college*; *gotta* start saving for college.’

He inspects his nails as the knuckles of Hannibal’s left hand turn white around his fork.

‘I just killed my brats,’ he adds. ‘Saved me the hassle of explaining what had happened to their mother. But I see *you* as the protective father type…’ Abel leans in, baring his teeth at Hannibal. ‘Would you feed your victims to them, or let them make their own decisions about engaging in cannibalism?’

‘You seem preoccupied with Will and I having children, Abel,’ Hannibal says, turning to face him, his expression calm but eyes snapping black fire. ‘Is there something you’d like to tell me?’

Abel snorts.

‘Oh, I think you *know*.’

At the flicker of hesitation on Hannibal’s face, the moment of blank confusion, the captive Alpha breaks out in a rasping laugh.

‘You *didn’t* know? He didn’t tell you? Oh, *this* is delicious. I wonder why he didn’t mention anything…?’

Hannibal’s chest tightens in an unbearable vice, squeezing his heart until it struggles to beat. His lips tingle, and a dizzying wave of excitement rises within him, setting each nerve alight as his brain makes the connection between Abel’s inflammatory words and Will’s delicious new scent. The honey-thick aftertaste… The smokiness…

No wonder Will has been struggling with the isolation. Suffering from sickness, headaches and chest pains…

He’s pregnant.

***

When Jack comes into the lab that evening for an update, Zeller is ready with the results from the weird dish of canapes they’d been asked to test yesterday.

‘Goose, pig, cow,’ he says, pointing to each petri dish.

‘Not *just* cow,’ Price says, looking faintly horrified. ‘Wagyu beef. There’s about a hundred dollar’s worth, right there.’

Zeller snorts.

‘How do you know it’s not Kobe?’

‘Well, all Kobe *is* wagyu, not all wagyu is Kobe,’ Price replies, and the other Beta rolls his eyes.

‘Okay.’

‘Well, at least we know Dr Lecter wasn’t serving up *people*,’ Price calls, admonishing and teasing Jack for his paranoia about a friend and respected colleague.

Now they’ll *never* be invited to a dinner party.

‘You want people?’ Zeller beckons them to follow him, leading the way to the wheeled table set out with each fishing lure from Gideon’s night guard. ‘The Chesapeake Ripper has been tying flies with them.’ He sighs. ‘… Just like Will Graham allegedly did.’

When they gather around the trays of evidence, his throat tightens, making his voice hoarse.

‘Hair woven into the mono filament is Beverly’s,’ he continues. ‘Bone fragments of Miriam Lass. Veining from Sheldon Isley, er, optical nerve and arteries from Judge Davies… and a toenail from James Gray, our Muralist. *All* victims of the Chesapeake Ripper.’

Jack nods slowly, absorbing the information. Price points to the dishes on his side of the bench.

‘These four lures are almost *identical* to what we found in Will’s house, made with material from the *exact* same human remains. Abigail Hobbs, Donald Sutcliffe, Marissa Schuur, Georgia Madchen.’

Oh, fuck.

Jack closes his eyes, his shoulders slumping as the weight of the truth buries him.

‘Will didn’t kill any of these people,’ he says quietly, looking from Price to Zeller. ‘There was no *copycat*. Never was.’

Zeller ducks his head, his jaw working as he squirms with embarrassment about how cruel he was to Will. How spiteful he was about him after the arrest.

‘It was always the Ripper,’ Jack continues. ‘*Finally* taking credit for all of his murders.’

‘Yeah,’ Zeller whispers. He swallows, finding his voice again. ‘Maybe too much credit. Found something *else* in the lures.’

‘Madrone bark,’ Price says, using a pair of tweezers to hold it up for Jack to see. ‘A tree almost non-existent on the East Coast, but *this* bark was peeled recently.’

Zeller grins, leaning closer.

‘There’s a small stand of madrone bark *in* Virginia.’

‘Inside your diatom search area?’ Jack asks, excitement zinging up his spine when both Betas nod.

‘Yep.’ Zeller leads him to the computer, pulling up the map again and zooming in using the new co-ordinates. ‘Here.’

Jack leans in, staring at a satellite image of forest, a disused service road and, tucked away and hidden far from prying eyes, the very thing he’s been hoping to find.

A cabin.

Gotcha.

***

After dinner, Hannibal settles Abel back down in the basement and then wanders from room to room, too restless to relax. He grins to himself, alight with zeal and yet blissfully calm as

all the pieces come together. It's all working out so perfectly; exactly as planned. Each part of the game completed as predicted, and each player behaving as required.

Very few ugly variables with anyone but you, Will.

Hannibal hums to himself, tapping the edge of his thigh as he peruses the shelves of his library for something to read. His composition tickles at his mind, and Hannibal's breath catches when he realizes how it should end.

He sits down at the harpsichord, his fingers brushing the ivory keys and releasing music into the room as he follows the notes laid out since Matthew's attack. The piece rises and falls, speaking of his pain and confusion, his fear at what the betrayal might mean for his relationship with Will…

The notes grow deeper, more intense, as his disappointment with Jack Crawford grows. Jack, who, right now, should be pulling up to the cabin in Somerville, Virginia, following the careful clues laid out in the fishing lures and Sheldon Isley.

Jack, who should be finding the old cellar and descending the creaking stairs to discover the vaults… One is filled with water for Isley's cherry tree, dank and freezing, stinking of compost. Jack will see it, and he will think he's found the Ripper's lair.

Joy and determination mark the ascension of the music, and Hannibal smiles again as he plays. Abel Gideon is his captive, and the next pieces have been put into place for the second part of his plan. Jack will be moving onto the second vault, expecting to find a grisly tableau. Heaving the iron lid back and staring down, staring in shock as golden eyes meet his, gazing out of a pretty, dirt-smeared face, one arm raised against the light, the other sewn off and ending in an ugly stump.

Miriam Lass is alive.

Hannibal's breath quickens, and he trembles as he hits the last chord, a deep, rumbling bass note that blends perfectly with the purr in his throat.

And Will and I are having a baby.

Yakimono

Chapter Summary

Miriam Lass is brought in to identify the Chesapeake Ripper, but although she has only vague memories of her captivity, she remains positive that Hannibal was not the one responsible.

Will is released from the BSHCI, exonerated of all charges as the evidence gathered from the most recent killings prove that his alleged victims were actually the Ripper's. Now free, but still bonded to Hannibal, he must decide how he wants to proceed, especially when he discovers that Hannibal is cheating on him with Alana Bloom.

Chapter Notes

Hey peeps, I'm SO sorry for the delay! And I promise, I AM working on my other Hannigram story, too. Life's just become VERY busy at the moment, and I've not been feeling too great.

Anywho, I HAVE FINALLY FINISHED THIS GLORIOUS CHAPTER, and Will is FREEEE!!!!

I can't wait for Chapter 8 now...

I hope you enjoy, and that there aren't too many typos / errors etc. As always, comments and suggestions are VERY welcome. xxx

SEVEN

Yakimono

As an orphaned, unbonded Omega, the legislation around the care of former FBI Agent in Training, Miriam Lass, is unclear, and Jack Crawford asks to take on the role of guardian until alternative arrangements can be made.

He sends the ambulance straight to Quantico, where a team of Betas swap Miriam’s silk and lace doll-dress for a paper gown, and take samples in the hopes of finding something they can use to identify the Ripper. Scrapings from under her nails, combings from her hair, which is

so matted and filthy with mud and grease that it's dark brown, not blonde… A tube of blood and swabs from her mouth.

They are all surprised when they check her nape and find it unblemished.

The Ripper never bit her. Never claimed her.

Throughout it all, Miriam holds perfectly still, her golden eyes locked on the far wall, breath coming in fast, shallow pants and skin grey. She flinches at every touch and there is no recognition when they call her name.

Eventually, a Victim Liaison Officer takes her to one of the apartments on campus.

'Come on, honey,' she says, steering the shivering Omega inside. 'Let's get you into the shower. We can get you a change of clothes and a nice hot meal, and then sleep. You'll feel better in the morning.'

Miriam strips without hesitation, unashamedly naked before the stranger. It's clearly not the first time during her capture that she's been undressed. The Beta averts her eyes and guides Miriam into the shower, leaving her to wash herself as she microwaves a ready meal.

The Omega eats it all, chewing methodically and drinking her glass of water in one go at the end. When she is put into bed, she lies flat on her back, her arms by her sides, the sleeve of her nightdress falling over the end of her stump. There is no attempt to make a nest, or curl up to find a sense of safety…

She really *has* been turned into a doll. Even now, she is simply waiting to be told what to do again.

'Goodnight, honey…' The Liaison Officer switches off the main light, but she leaves a low glow of nightlights around the apartment. 'I'll be back to check on you in the morning.'

Miriam stares up at the bedroom ceiling, her lips pursed together, heart rapping a dull thud against her ribcage as night slowly bleeds into day.

She sleeps for one hour, just before dawn, and then rises to get dressed in the slacks, boots and FBI sweatshirt left on the dresser.

By the time Jack Crawford arrives at nine, she has eaten breakfast and brushed her hair with exactly one hundred strokes, tying the gleaming yellow strands back into a loose ponytail.

The Alpha sits in the chair at an angle to her, separated by the coffee table, holding his chin in his hand as he watches her.

Miriam rubs at the bandage covering her stump, self-conscious of her trembling and the rigid set of her shoulders. She keeps her eyes lowered, the irises still bright with fearful gold, and bares her throat to him.

'Thank you,' she mumbles, hugging herself to keep from rocking. 'I knew you'd never stop looking.'

Jack says nothing; just lifts his other hand to rest his chin on the knuckles of them both. Miriam swallows, and forces herself to look at him.

‘Can I see him?’

Jack’s chest tightens, making it difficult to breathe, but he can’t lie to her. He won’t.

‘We haven’t caught the Ripper,’ he says, his voice rasping with an angry growl. Miriam quivers, sharp fear flooding the air between them as her pulse races in her neck.

‘He’s…’ She gulps. ‘He’s still…?’

Out there? He’s still out there?

‘We need your *help*, Miriam,’ Jack says, grounding her in her training. Reminding her of who she used to be. ‘You *know* who he is.’

All the color drains from Miriam’s face, and she shakes her head.

‘I *don’t*… know who he is.’

‘You *found* him,’ Jack persists, smiling at her, his eyes warming to burgundy with pride. Tears well in Miriam’s.

‘I don’t *remember* finding him,’ she whispers, and Jack sighs, disappointed. Miriam clenches her right hand into a fist on her lap, staring at the air in front of her. ‘He got inside my head,’ she mutters, and then she has to stop, because her throat is too tight and she’s not sure she can remember how to breathe.

Jack purrs, just once; a low, deep sound like a tiger. A soothing sound, which Miriam reacts to by releasing a slow, quivering breath.

‘I remember a dream about drowning,’ she continues, nodding to herself. It hurts, but she pushes through, gritting her teeth and swallowing hard before speaking again. ‘And then being awake, and not awake… being myself and not myself…’

Jack watches as his former Omegan trainee winces at the recollection, his own muscles locked tight to keep him from getting up and hugging her. Shielding her from it all.

He can’t do that. Not yet.

‘I’d wake up to the smell of fresh flowers and the sting of a needle,’ Miriam says, her eyes swimming with tears. ‘I wasn’t afraid… Fear and pain were so… far away.’

‘I was reckless with your life,’ Jack says, sorrow etched into every line of his face.

A hint of Miriam’s fire returns in her frown; in the way she clenches her jaw.

‘No, *I* was reckless with my life,’ she replies.

Jack shakes his head, growling at himself.

‘I saw what I needed in you and I used you. I was the Alpha responsible for your care. I should have protected you. I let you break the rules on my behalf while I hid behind deniability.’

Miriam shakes her head, spilling wetness onto her cheeks and sleeve.

‘Agent Crawford, please do not apologize to me for my mistakes,’ she says. ‘He treated me very well. Until the end… Until he put me in the ground.’ Miriam shudders and tries to shrug. ‘Even when… he took my arm… He *told* me what he was going to do. I went to sleep, woke up, it was gone…’ She glances at Jack’s chest, unable to reach his face. ‘He said he wanted to give it to you.’

He did, Jack thinks, staring at her. He narrows his eyes.

‘Can you identify him?’

Miriam shakes her head.

‘I could hear his *voice*, but I couldn’t see his face. All I could see…’ She falters, reaching up to rub at the back of her neck. ‘Was light. All I could *feel* was pressure, here.’

Jack frowns, considering her in silence for several seconds. Then, very softly, he asks,

‘Why didn’t he kill you, Miriam? Why were you spared?’

Miriam sniffs, lowering her hand from her nape again.

‘I wasn’t *spared*,’ she whispers, pupils shrinking to pinpricks lost amongst the gold. ‘He was saving me for last.’

***

At half past ten that morning, Hannibal meets Alana at the Quantico reception desk and shrugs out of his coat, folding it over his arm before pinning a visitor’s badge to his suit jacket. The Beta is quiet as she leads him to the interview rooms on the second floor; she reeks of anger, sharp and rough, as well as Jack’s rut-laced scent and a sweet, sugary Omegan musk.

Miriam Lass is here.

Stepping inside the room, Hannibal looks around at the sound-proofed walls and two-way mirror facing him. Alana, pale against the blue of her jersey dress, sinks into the chair across the metal table from him, and Hannibal sighs as he sets his coat down on it before sitting.

‘They found a witness,’ Alana says, her voice heavy with sorrow as Hannibal looks at her expectantly. ‘A survivor,’ she continues. ‘The only victim of the Chesapeake Ripper who lived to tell.’

Hannibal inclines his head, his ears pricked for the tell-tale static of microphones, dark eyes flicking towards the dull heartbeat he can hear from the other side of the mirror.

‘Is this witness watching me now?’ he asks, knowing he is being transmitted via video monitors to Miriam.

‘Yes,’ Alana says, nodding once.

Hannibal sighs, allowing his expression to sharpen with annoyance.

‘It seems I am the usual suspect.’

Alana dips her head, staring at the hands clasped before her.

‘I keep having angry, imaginary conversations with Jack Crawford about that.’ At Hannibal’s continued silence, she swallows. ‘I wish I could tell you *why* this is happening.’

I know why, Hannibal thinks. He decides to take pity on her, and sighs as he breaks the gaze, looking over at the mirror.

‘This witness must not be able to identify the Ripper by sight,’ he says. He stands, approaching the two-way glass. ‘Jack wants them to hear my voice, otherwise I’d be in here alone. Right?’

He leans down and offers Alana a small smile, even as she stares up and gives him a minute nod.

‘Still,’ Hannibal muses. ‘I appreciate your company.’

He faces the mirror again, tracking Miriam’s heartbeat. Fast, fast and then slow. Steady as she takes deep breaths.

That’s it. Just like we practiced.

He stares at her, right where he *knows* she’s standing, and he waits, straining to hear her voice.

Very faintly, he senses Miriam turn to Jack and speak the inevitable words.

‘It’s not him.’

‘Are you sure?’ Jack growls, and Hannibal pupils widen as Miriam’s breath catches.

‘*Yes*,’ the Omega says. ‘He’s not the Ripper.’

Hearing those words, after so many months preparing…

Hannibal has to fight down the urge to purr, feeling his irises prickle with the need to glow red with pride.

That’s my girl.

***

To Will's surprise, the unbearably long gap between powdered eggs for breakfast and a dry cheese sandwich for lunch is interrupted by the unexpected arrival of two Orderlies, pulling him from his thoughts.

He had been lying on his back on the cot, staring up at the watermarked ceiling and trying to understand *why* Hannibal had been so happy last night, but Will sits up when the two Betas dressed in white come to a stop outside his cell door.

'Get up,' the friendlier of them barks. 'Get dressed. You're being released.'

There's a moment where the words hang in the air, suspended in a vacuum of time, and then Will's heart trips over itself and begins to pound.

'What?'

In lieu of repeating himself, the Orderly extends a bundle of clothes – *Will's clothes* – through the bars and wiggles them, making the belt buckle clink.

Oh my God…

Will scrambles to his feet, excitement setting his blood on fire and making him clumsy. He grabs for the clothes, his relief at the feel of the different textures so sharp that he laughs out a sob, pressing them to his face and inhaling the powdery soap smell of the prison laundry room, and, beneath that, embedded in the cotton fibers, his own scent, his dogs and *home*.

Tears well in his eyes and his knees threaten to give way at the shock of it. Will's throat is so tight he can barely breathe, and when the Orderlies shove an envelope and his boots through the bars before turning to leave, he takes a step forwards before he can stop himself, even though inmates aren't supposed to approach the bars without permission.

'Wait,' he croaks. 'Why now?'

'Dr Chilton will be down to sign you out,' the friendly Orderly replies, putting on his most bored voice in what is clearly an attempt to discourage Will's curiosity, now that he can no longer punish him for it. 'He'll be able to answer any questions you may have.'

Will presses himself to the door, staring after them until they disappear from his line of sight, and then he hugs his clothes to him again, barking out another laugh and wiping his tears away on his shirt.

I can't believe it… Is this really happening?

He's started dreaming again, since Hannibal's visit… Is this just a nightmare? Is he going to find himself unable to escape; blocked by the raven stag, or held down by the wendigo? Is Hannibal going to appear, and lead him back into the cage, to be locked away forever?

Will sighs, and scrubs at the stubble on his cheeks, dropping his bundle of clothes onto the cot. There's only one way to find out.

He toes off the ugly sneakers he's been forced to wear, strips out of his prison jumpsuit and jerks his t-shirt over his head, throwing it all into a heap by the sink. Turns to his clothes and rummages through until he finds the boxers he was arrested in; freshly washed and folded inside the soft jersey top Hannibal had picked out for him that day back at Wolf Trap.

The day he had me arrested me for Abigail's murder…

Will growls under his breath, sliding his prison boxers down his thighs and quickly replacing them with the softer cotton boxers from his own collection. He hums, realizing just how *abrasive* the cheap underwear had been now that he has good quality material against his sensitive skin.

His jeans are next; deliciously structured but too snug around his hips. Will frowns, trying to pull the button closed, but it squeezes him painfully and he ends up securing them with just the zipper and belt, now worn three holes looser.

How in the hell he's *gained* weight in prison is anyone's guess.

He has the distinct need to wear as many layers as possible, and pulls on socks – *socks* – and his boots, t-shirt and black shirt before emptying the envelope of his belongings. House keys, cash, folding knife and a dead cell phone.

Dr Chilton's distinctively lop-sided gait and the click of his walking cane on concrete flooring warns Will of the Alpha's approach long before his scent announces him, but he doesn't look up. Just shrugs into his waxed leather jacket as the Chief of Staff comes to stand on the other side of his cell door, no doubt watching his former patient with a mixture of emotions on his sly face.

'This is very sudden,' Will mutters, buttoning his shirt so he doesn't have to *look* at Dr Chilton. If he does, he's not sure what he'll do, and he doesn't want to risk not getting out of here.

'The federal prosecutor dropped all charges,' Frederick replies, *actually* managing to sound *annoyed* by Will's innocence. 'Since you were *not* convicted of killing anyone, the basis for your sentencing to this institution is null and void…' A huff. 'The Chesapeake Ripper has set you *free*. Mazel tov.'

Will ignores him, still staring over at his sink, giving Frederick only his side profile.

He doesn't have to be *nice* anymore. Chilton can't hurt him, now, and Will isn't going to forget the Alpha's gleeful intrusion into his braced and vulnerable body, nor his digs about Will's apparent psychosis.

The door buzzes as the security guards unlock his cell, and Will's heart leaps into his throat, battering against his windpipe as excitement coils in his gut. He turns, still wondering if this is just an elaborate design created by his desperate brain… If the door really *will* swing away from him when he pushes it…

He reaches out, his hand trembling, and gives it a shove, his eyes flashing gold when it does indeed open, the hinges squealing.

Frederick starts talking at him again.

‘I would love nothing more than to see you trade places with Dr Lecter.’ The Alpha sniffs and rolls his eyes. ‘I have no intention of ending up on his menu.’

Fine tremors in his legs make him wonder if he’s going to fall, but Will manages to stay upright as he steps out into the corridor. It’s happening… It’s really happening… The dream isn’t collapsing and he’s really walking free.

It’s a drunk, euphoric sensation.

‘Well then *confess*, Frederick,’ he says, rolling his shoulders as the open space presses in on him and then suddenly relaxes, letting him *breathe* again.

He’s going home.

‘Might be the only thing saves your *life*,’ he adds, picking up the pace as he walks away from his former captor.

Behind him, Frederick huffs and starts limping after him.

‘Confess to *what?’*

‘Confess to *bonding* with Hannibal Lecter over your shared practice of unorthodox therapies,’ Will replies, savoring the ability to walk by himself, without his wrists and ankles shackled; not escorted by a guard or strapped to a wheelchair. ‘Dr Lecter with *me*, *you* with Abel Gideon.’

‘Gideon is playing his own game,’ Frederick croons, his arrogance lending him an unwarranted amount of confidence. ‘He was wheeled out of that hospital by the Chesapeake Ripper.’ He snorts. ‘Curious what bargain *they* struck.

Will bares his teeth in a bitter smile, looking up at the open doorway of the security checkpoint instead of shoving Chilton for being such an idiot.

‘No, there’s no bargaining with *smoke*,’ he says. ‘No… Gideon’s dead.’

Glancing over his shoulder, he looks up through his lashes and purrs, just once; an eerily sweet sound given the cold fire snapping in his golden eyes.

‘You’re next.’

‘Unless I unburden myself,’ Frederick mutters, gulping down the lump in his throat.

Will moves to face him, a darkly coy smile still tugging at his mouth.

‘Confession is good for the soul,’ he quips, and Frederick adjusts his weight back onto his heels as though bracing himself for an attack. As though speaking to another Alpha.

An equal.

Will grows serious again, his voice rasping with a growl as he continues,

‘Shine a *light* on your relationship with Hannibal Lecter. He works in the shadows… Deny them to him.’

As quickly as his temper flared, the fire inside him burns out, and Will slumps. More than *anything* else, he’s just *tired*. He just wants to go home and see his dogs.

His mate.

‘Tell Jack Crawford everything,’ he mutters, turning away again, no longer able to breathe in this dank, stale place. No longer certain where he’s going to go when he gets outside.

‘Are you suggesting I kill my *career* before Hannibal can kill me?’ Frederick splutters, but Will doesn’t have the patience to placate him right now. He sighs as he withdraws his glasses from inside the front pocket of his coat, needing more shields between himself and the world, because everything hurts and right now all he wants is Hannibal, which is also exactly the *last* thing he wants.

‘I’m *suggesting* you convince jack Crawford however you can,’ he says heavily, pushing the frames up his nose and then sneering at Chilton. ‘Like your *life* depends on it.’

Because it does, Frederick. If it isn’t already too late.

He shakes his head in disgust and begins walking away from Frederick again, only pausing at the bottom of the stairs to the main level when the other man calls,

‘Why did Hannibal not just kill you?’

Will smiles, and looks over at him, golden eyes safely hidden behind tinted glasses once again.

‘Because he wants to be a good mate,’ he explains, in the same light and simple tone that Hannibal himself might use. He sees Chilton pause, hears the click of his throat as he swallows, and then he climbs the stairs to the visitor’s hall, and the exit.

A guard opens the airlock door for him, nodding with polite disinterest as Will walks through, unattended. There’s still a flicker of unease in his belly, but Will is quick to tap down on it. He just wants *out* of here.

Someone is waiting for him in the hall of dunking tanks, though, and Will slows at the rich, Alpha musk hanging in the air like fog.

‘You need a ride?’ Jack Crawford asks, raising his voice from the other end of the room, where he’s leaning with an elbow on the bannister of the stairs. Will approaches slowly,

making no effort to hide the anger that he feels at seeing his old boss here.

‘I was gonna call a *cab*,’ he replies. A barbed comment but also a statement of his newfound freedom.

Jack nods, watching as Will slows but doesn’t stop his approach.

‘We found Miriam Lass,’ he says, eyes flashing red at the name. ‘*Alive*.’

Will comes to a halt a few meters from Jack, nodding once. He glances off to the side, his heart skittering behind his ribs. Hannibal doesn’t *feel* worried or angry…

‘You catch the Ripper?’ he asks quietly, not sure if he’s relieved or disappointed when Jack shakes his head.

Fuck… I’m so fucked up.

Will ducks his head, rubbing at the sudden sheen of sweat on his forehead.

‘How *is* she?’ he asks. ‘Miriam.’

God… Has Hannibal bonded her, too? Does he have a harem of us, like the Alphas of old?

‘Traumatized,’ Jack replies, pushing off from the wall. He rolls his eyes as he steps closer, shoving his hands into the pockets of his trousers. ‘Miriam *thanked* me, after we found her. Thanked me for not giving up on her.’ Despite the evenness of his voice, his eyes burn red. ‘But I *had*… I *had* given up on her, and I gave up on *you*, too.’

Jack comes to stand three feet from Will, close enough that, if the Omega wanted to strike him, he could.

‘I thought she was dead,’ he continues, hands loose by his sides. ‘I thought you were crazy. And I gave up on trying to find the both of you.’

Jesus… Is that an apology, Jack…?

Will takes a deep breath, releasing it very slowly so as not to snarl. There aren’t really *words* for what he’s feeling right now; this swarming mass of black snakes in his gut, each one biting and poisoning him the longer they stay there.

He pulls away and gestures to the cages around him, trying for a smirk but knowing that his chin is wobbling and his eyes are too bright.

‘You didn’t have to *find* me, Jack.’ He taps one of the cages, making the Alpha flinch at the sound of clanging metal.

He can’t *do* this right now.

Will starts for the door again as he adds,

‘You just had to *listen* to me.’

Jack growls under his breath. He doesn’t turn, but his voice carries as he says,

‘I put Miriam in a room with Hannibal Lecter; she stated definitively he is *not* the Chesapeake Ripper.’

Will hesitates on the first step of the stairs, his heart racing, palms tingling.

‘That *definitive* enough for you?’

‘No,’ Jack sighs, and, as Will turns back to face him, he sees the Alpha’s shoulders slump. ‘It wasn’t.’

You’re still with me on this…

Will shows his teeth in a cold smile, the snakes in his belly writhing and hissing in anticipation of the hunt.

‘Where’d you find Miriam, Jack?’

***

They make good time to the cabin, especially with Jack’s flexible approach when it comes to speed limits. Will’s stomach is now full of chocolate milkshake from a drive-thru he’d *insisted* they stop at, though the smell of Jack’s sneaky pre-lunchtime burger had made heave, and he’s quick to climb out of the SUV the second the parking brake is on.

Shit… Maybe this wasn’t a good idea…

Police and forensic officers swarm the place, and the crackle of a cop’s radio sets Will’s teeth on edge. He has to force himself to shut the car door, his eyes locked on the yawning darkness beyond the open door to the old lodge as Jack comes around to lead him onto the scene.

‘Property was condemned years ago,’ the Alpha explains, gesturing with a leather-gloved hand, his face shadowed beneath the brim of his fedora. ‘Apparently, the Ripper has been using it since that time.’

No, he hasn’t.

Will sniffs against the bitter cold air, trying to appreciate the feel of the breeze on his face, but it’s fucking freezing and he’s not in heat anymore, so he feels every snap of frost on his bare fingers. The one good thing about his longer hair is that the mop of curls are keeping his ears warm.

Examining the tree line, and the general air of *disuse* about the place, Will keeps his mouth shut as he ducks under the yellow tape after Jack.

They head inside, brushing away any dangling cobwebs and studiously ignoring the scuttling of rats disturbed by their intrusion. Will sticks close to Jack, feeling curious and occasionally disapproving eyes on him the whole time. It's the first time he's visited a crime scene as an Omega, without dousing himself in Beta spray, and he hasn't taken his lunchtime dose of scent suppressants, so his sweet musk will be growing stronger as his tension rises.

Moving between dust-coated farm equipment and rusted chains, Will peers down into the first vault, careful not to get in the way of the officer dusting the lid for fingerprints. The well is filled with water, putrid and black with rot. Bits of moss and algae float on the surface, which ripples with the footsteps of everyone around it. His detailed reflection is not in the bottom, but he looms there, still; the light behind him, with a corona like his hair on fire. And, from somewhere deep inside him, he hears Hannibal's voice, whispering to him as he rests in his arms.

You can be as strong as you wish to be…

'Will,' Jack murmurs, drawing his attention again. 'In here.'

Will blinks, dragging himself back from the dark pool. He nods, following the Alpha through to a second room off the cellar.

It is laid out with medical and butcher's equipment; a stainless steel operating table, a tray of surgical tools, each one pristine and placed in order of use… Will stops when he sees a second set of Perspex sheets, stood in the corner as though waiting for the next tableau.

Beverly…

Beneath the window, glass jars gleam with a dull burgundy light; each one filled to the brim.

'That's Beverly Katz's blood,' Jack says, following his line of sight. 'He drained her before he froze her; before he cut into her.'

Will nods again. He's not sure he'll ever be able to use his voice after this. The *pain* in this room; the violence stains the walls like tar, seeping beneath his skin and turning his own blood to ash.

'The Chesapeake Ripper's latest victim,' Jack says, opening a file and holding out a photograph for Will to see. 'He was found in the other cistern. The water in his lungs is what led us here.'

Oh my God… He's my posy…

Will stares at the photograph of Sheldon Isley, at the flowers placed inside his hollowed-out trunk. When he hands them back, Jack takes him to the first room again, shining his torch down into the second cistern.

'We found Miriam down there,' he says, the faint beam of light dancing across the slick surface of the old bricks and stagnant water. 'She believed the Ripper brought her here to kill her. He was saving her to be his last victim.'

A low purr in his ear; claws rake across his crest and Will's shadow swells, merging with the venomous snakes until the darkness spills out into his lungs, his heart and up into his mind.

He crouches, agile as a predator, and stares down into the pit where his sweet girl waited.

'He *knows* we're close to catching him,' Jack hisses, and Will hums, but not in agreement.

'Well, he's been *caught* before,' he murmurs, sliding his glasses from his face and tapping them on his other hand as he looks around at the *stage* that's been set for them all. The *props* and *actors*. 'Catch a fish once and it gets away… It's a *lot* harder to catch a second time.'

I almost had him… I almost caught him… But he knows I'm onto him now. I have to be smart.

The shadow burbles its agreement, humming at the idea of a chase. A kill.

You came for me, Will thinks, sinking into the warm current of his mind, feeling it drag and tug at the edges of his consciousness. *Now I'm coming for you.*

He closes his eyes, embracing the darkness, and the pendulum swings.

Time reverses, removing Jack. It swings again, a beam of light carving through the scene. Will can hear his heartbeat, and his darkness throbs with each thud.

The props disappear, one by one. They were planted here, but they don't belong.

Only the flowers remain.

As the hours unwind, the dead petals bloom once again. Wilted stems rise up, proud in their vase, and vibrant colors dazzle.

Thud-thud… Thud-thud…

Will closes his eyes and, when he looks again, he is in Hannibal's office. The fire crackles in the hearth behind him, and the room smells of leather, of polish and Hannibal's cologne. But this time there is a cherry tree, unearthed and belching roots across the hardwood floor, its vines piercing Sheldon Isley, holding him in place.

Holding out his hand, Will approaches the tableau, carrying the belladonna heart. The other flowers are already in place; this is the final piece.

'I sowed the seeds,' Will purrs, gazing up at his work, his *mate's* work, with pride. 'And watched them grow.'

The poison heart beats strong, thundering in time to his own.

He is the poison heart…

A dark and deadly love.

'I cultivated…'

His stomach growls as blood oozes down Sheldon's broken ribs.

'A *long* chain of events, leading to *this*.'

Before his very eyes, the cherry blossoms burst into flower, awakened from their dormant slumber, ready to show the world *exactly* what they are. Ready to be free of their shells, and the cages holding them back.

'*All* of this,' Will breathes, his eyes glowing gold, alight with a feral fury, as he raises his arms to behold the glory. 'Has been my design.'

He stares up at himself, through the amber eyes of Miriam Lass, his clever, pretty girl, and then down as he grabs the lid of the vault and slides it shut.

Come and find her, Jack.

'It's theater.'

The Alpha's low voice drags him from his reverie, but Will holds himself perfectly still as he returns to himself, still crouched over the vault.

'Every time the Ripper kills someone, it's theater,' Jack growls.

'The Ripper didn't bring Miriam here to kill her,' Will says. He rises, and dusts his hands off on his trousers. 'He brought her here for you to find.'

Jack frowns, confused.

'But… the Ripper's not self-destructive; he doesn't wanna get caught.'

Will looks around, sharp eyes trying to pick out something, *anything*, that might have been missed.

'He wants you to catch *someone*.' A quick grimace at Jack, a flash of gold before his eyes return to icy, angry blue. 'Like he wanted you to catch *me*.'

Remember, Jack? Remember how you found just the right amount of evidence to convict me?

Will gestures to the room again.

'Somewhere, in *all* of this evidence, you will find something that leads you *away* from Hannibal Lecter.'

'Miriam Lass has already *done* that,' Jack says, frustrating tightening his voice. Will scoffs and narrows his eyes at him.

'Two years,' he replies. 'That's a *long* time to have Hannibal in your head.' He swallows, jealousy flaring like acid in his stomach.

It was only in her head… Right? Please… Please let it only be her head.

Pursing his lips, Will inclines his head towards the Alpha.

‘You can’t trust her, Jack.’ He shrugs, looking at Hannibal’s latest kabuki. ‘You can’t trust *any* of this to be what it seems.’

Nothing is ever what it seems when it comes to Hannibal Lecter.

***

A field agent offers to drive him home from the crime scene. They don’t talk much in the car; the agent listens to the radio and occasionally talks about holiday plans with his mate and two kids. Will mostly just sits there, his belly fluttering with more and more excitement the closer they get to Wolf Trap.

It’s late in the afternoon by the time they turn down the driveway to the farmhouse, and the low sun throws long shadows over the bare trees and mounds of snow blanketing the fields.

Climbing down from the back of the SUV, Will is hit by a wave of *longing* strong enough to make his eyes water. He removes his glasses, folding them and shoving them into his jacket pocket; Jack-Dog doesn’t like men in glasses.

The pack calls to him as he crunches his way towards the porch; a cacophony of high, medium and low barks that make his heart swell until Will’s sure there’s no more room for it in his chest. A lock clicks and then the dogs are released, all seven of them bounding towards him in a flurry of wagging tails and lolling tongues.

‘Hey!’

Will purrs, high and loud, and drops to his knees as he envelopes them, greeting each one with a head rub and a full body stroke, letting them lick his hands, arms and neck. Letting them sniff and rub their scents over him as they welcome him back to the pack.

Back to their *family.*

The door opens, and Alana steps out into the front yard, her hands in the pockets of her navy coat, blue eyes narrowed as she watches Will with the dogs.

‘Welcome home,’ she calls, her tone cool and shoulders squared.

Will looks up, instinctively baring his throat to her, and then ducking his head when he senses the razor-edge to her words. *She’s* angry with *him?* She’s not the one who’s been locked up for weeks.

‘Thank you.’ He stays where he is, fussing everyone when they come back, letting them go to check on the house and then watching as they return to him again. ‘Thank you for looking after them… They seem happy.’

‘Happy to see *you*,’ Alana says, winding a leash around her hands so she has something to do.

Inspecting an eighth dog, a brown-speckled collie mongrel constantly shoved aside by Jack-Dog, Will checks her collar for a nametag.

‘Who’s this?’

‘Apple Sauce,’ Alana replies, smiling fondly. ‘She’s mine.’

Coming closer, she shrugs when Will raises an eyebrow at her choice of names.

‘She likes apple sauce.’ The Beta clips the leash onto the collar and tugs her dog away, allowing Will to resume fussing Bruce, his Lab-cross, and Jack-Dog.

‘Picking up some of my bad habits?’ Will drawls, grinning at her as he gets to his feet, hands still reaching for licks and cold noses.

Alana frowns at him.

‘Picking up your *good* habits,’ she corrects.

Will keeps his eyes down, using the dogs as an excuse to not look at her, but Alana was never one to leave something alone, even when she should.

‘You challenged my whole framework of assumptions about the way you are,’ the Beta says, steely eyes locked onto Will’s face. ‘The way I *think* you are.’

His temper flares, and Will uses it to give him the strength to ignore every instinct screaming at him to submit.

‘Well, the way you *think* I am isn’t always a reliable guide to *who* I am,’ he reminds her, smiling bitterly.

She was *so* ready to believe that he was a murderer… A *psychopath*…

Did you ever really know me at all? Were we ever really friends, or was I your pet project? Fix Will?

Alana glances away, and then meets his gaze squarely again.

‘I was wrong about you,’ she admits, but it’s not the apology he’d expected, and Will blinks away the sudden urge to cry, turning the disappointment kicking him in the balls into fresh rage.

‘Because you didn’t believe me?’ he says. ‘Or *in* me? Because you…’ He shrugs, extending his arms as the anger at all the rejection comes boiling up to the surface. ‘Let me *question* my *sanity?* My sense of reality?’

‘Because you tried to kill Hannibal,’ Alana snaps.

What…?

Will stares at her, his heart faltering in its usual rhythm as shock robs him of his voice. She… She's not sorry that she turned against him… That she let him rot in a prison cell awaiting what was *probably* the death penalty…

She's upset that he decided to take action against the man he *knows* to be the Chesapeake Ripper.

Not upset… She's angry… She's defending him, the same way she'd defend a mate…

He remembers seeing the protective way she touched Hannibal's arm, when his Alpha had been lying in the hospital bed… The way she'd stroked him… Soothed him…

She really does love him.

'You're *wrong* about him, Will,' Alana continues, imploring him to understand. To believe her.

Will growls, deep in his throat, reaching down to soothe Jack-Dog when the hound nudges him in worry.

'No, *you're* wrong about him, Alana,' he says. 'You see the best in him. I…' *See the truth. Every layer. The man and the monster.* '… Don't.'

He crouches again, distracting himself by scrubbing Winston's scruff, his crest flaring with heat and swelling until the five ridges press against the collar of his shirt, sending tingles down his spine.

'What was done to you doesn't excuse what you did,' Alana insists. 'He was your *Alpha*, Will. Your *mate*…' She shakes her head, wet eyes on the orange-slashed sky.

Was…?

Will frowns at her choice of words, but he returns his attention to Bruce when a brown head nudges his elbow.

'Are you going to try to hurt Hannibal again?' Alana asks, leaning down to get Will's attention, her voice soft but powerful. 'Is he *safe?*'

He was your Alpha. Is he safe?

Will stiffens, suspicion stealing his breath. He withdraws from the dogs, staring up at the Beta.

'From me or *for* you?' he asks, his eyes flooding gold at the question.

Please… Please deny it… Say it's from me… Please…

Alana blushes, looking down as she fidgets, and the sick realization, the *pain* at knowing that Hannibal really has done what Will feared the most… That Hannibal has *cheated* on him with Alana…

It's worse than anything he's ever felt in his life.

He nods, a cold numbness spreading through his body, and straightens up.

'He's *dangerous*, Alana.' He looks her up and down, disgust twisting his lips, and then shakes his head. 'I suggest you stay as *far* away from Hannibal Lecter as you can.'

I wish to God that I had.

Alana flinches, but she doesn't respond. There's nothing to say, after all.

Will stomps past her, whistling to the dogs and calling them into the house with him. He hears the crunch of snow under Alana's boots as she heads to her car, and then he shuts the door on her. On everything and everyone in the outside world.

Hannibal's fucked Alana.

The air gets very thin, and Will watches his fingers shake as he slides the chain across. He turns, shrugging out of his waxed jacket. The house is cold, and smells musty where it's been sat empty for weeks.

How many weeks, exactly? How many days, and nights, and days again?

Hannibal's fucked Alana.

Blowing out his breath, Will scrubs at his face and stumbles to his drinks cabinet. He pulls out a bottle of whiskey, the cheap kind that burns on its way down, and pours himself a double, knocking it back in one quick, practiced motion.

The whiskey makes him cough, and his streaming eyes make it difficult to pour the next one, but he manages. Will stumbles towards the bed, sighing when he sees an empty mattress.

'Fuck it.'

He takes another swig of his drink and sets the tumbler on the desk. Grabs the mattress from the bedframe and hauls it towards the fireplace, shoving at the couch to move it. He twists the dial on the space heater, watching as the dogs gather around the glowing wires, each of them choosing a spot on his bed.

'Better save some room for me,' he mutters, pointing to them all before leaving to fetch blankets, pillows, throws and sheets from the closet. He arranges them into a high-edged nest, wiping whiskey from his lips when he finishes his second glass and then shrugging, and pulling the cushions off the couch, adding them as a wall around the bed.

Hannibal's fucked Alana.

Grinding the heels of his hands into his eyes, Will tries in vain to dig out the betrayal stabbing at his heart. He's already feeling the effects of the whiskey – after so many weeks without alcohol, a long day behind him and an empty stomach, his mind is swimming. Will meanders into the bathroom and uses the toilet, reveling in the *privacy* of it, the *silence*

around him and the sound of a proper flush. He groans when he sees the shower, reaching over to turn it on before he's even started undressing.

Steam rises, but Will leaves the water almost scalding. He kicks off his boots and socks, unbuttons his shirt and pulls his top over his head, sliding jeans and boxers down shaking thighs before climbing into the tub.

God… I'd forgotten how good a proper shower feels…

He doesn't know how long he stands there, his face to the hot spray, hair plastered to his scalp and skin turning red. After a while, he adjusts position so the shower can batter the tight muscles across his shoulders, wincing every time it stings his crest, but also unwilling to move. Maybe, if he doesn't move, he won't *think*…

Hannibal's fucked Alana.

His legs wobble, and Will grabs the cold tiles for support, sinking to his knees as dizziness overwhelms him. The water rains onto his back, running up over his head as he wraps his arms around his aching stomach and presses his forehead to the base of the tub, gasping for breath.

Hannibal's fucked Alana. He's fucked Alana… He's fucked Alana…

He can't stop the thought, the spinning truth. The *cruelty* of his mate's actions.

This is because of Matthew. Because I sucked him off.

Rage fills him; a blinding fury so strong it makes his jaw ache with the need to tear into his Alpha's throat. Will slams his fist into the side of the bathtub, hissing at the pain shooting up his arm, and then he does it again, and again, and again, over and over until the shampoo bottles topple out of their holder and fall on him, bringing him back to his senses.

'*Fuck* you, Hannibal,' Will snarls, flexing his fingers to check he's not broken his knuckles.

They're fine; just bruised.

'*Fuck* you.'

He staggers back to his feet, shivering in the cooling water. Washes his hair with his old shampoo, not the one that smells of Hannibal's cologne, and then turns the shower off, wrapping himself in three of his thick, soft towels.

It's good to be home, at least.

Winston, Buster and Jack-Dog are waiting for him when Will *finally* emerges from the bathroom. He lets them lick at the droplets running down his legs as he pads into his bedroom to retrieve a t-shirt and a fresh pair of boxers to sleep in, and he yawns as he gets dressed, scrubbing at his hair and then combing it through with his fingers.

He really needs to get it cut.

‘You hungry?’ he calls, turning to find seven eager dogs stood in a semi-circle around him, tails wagging at the possibility of food. Will grins, tears welling and throat clogged.

He’s missed them so much.

He throws the towels into the laundry basket and then, because he *can* now that he’s free, digs out an old Cajun jazz album and slots it into his record player. Static crackles for a moment, and then the sound of blues trombones, guitars and smoky voices – *bayou music* – fills the little house.

‘Winston, this is real music,’ Will explains, nodding sagely to his newest dog. He grins, and gives himself one last whiskey, a single this time, to sip while he’s cooking. Wanders into the kitchen, shuddering when he sees the sink, clean at least, and minus an *ear*, and then opens the refrigerator, surprised to find that Alana has topped up his supplies. Fresh milk, vegetables, meat for the dogs and even a fish.

‘At least she’s a *considerate* mate-stealing-bitch,’ he mutters, loading everything into his arms.

He makes the dogs’ food first, content to watch them eat before he turns his attention to his own meal. Pan-fried trout, garlic butter potatoes and green beans.

‘Sorry, Dr Lecter, nothing *fancy* about *this* plate,’ he says, making a point *not* to arrange anything in a stupidly fancy way. ‘*Normal* people don’t eat gourmet food *every* day.’

He pauses before getting a beer out. The smell of the fish is making him feel queasy, but maybe that’s just from too much whiskey before eating…

Will pours himself a large glass of orange juice, instead, and resolutely takes his food to the table. He’s not even *swallowed* his first mouthful of trout, though, before he’s gagging, and running right back to that goddamn sink to spit out, his mouth full of too-wet spit as his stomach roils.

What the…?

Since when can’t he eat fish? And he loves trout; it’s one of the first things he remembers eating. The first thing he learned to cook, so he could have a hot meal ready for his dad when he got home from work…

Leaning back against the counter, Will absently rubs his stomach as he waits for the nausea to subside.

Maybe he’s not ready for rich food, yet.

The smell’s really getting to me.

Will strides back to the table and gulps down his juice, washing away the residual taste of fish. He dumps the trout into a baggy for the dogs to have for breakfast and then opens the back door and all the windows, shivering as the temperature rapidly drops. Stood at the counter, he forces himself to eat the potatoes and beans, although they’re only really edible

once they're dunked in a stupid amount of tomato sauce, which still isn't really *sweet* enough, even with sugar sprinkled on top.

He wants something *actually* sweet.

Will huffs to himself, peering into all the cupboards and rummaging through the freezer. Why doesn't he have any chocolate or candy? What kind of Omega doesn't have *candy?*

He eventually finds a strawberry ice pole at the back of the freezer, and a chocolate protein bar in his desk drawer, which, whilst not *quite* right, will do for now. As he devours the bar in three huge bites, Will can't help but long for that sweet bread and butter pudding that Hannibal made – *probably with people, remember?* – with the vanilla cream and coulis…

I wonder if Hannibal ever eats normal food… Would he ever grind someone into a burger?

He groans, crunching his ice pole to eradicate that particular thought. His skin's pebbling with cold now, but the bad smell finally seems to have dissipated, so he closes the windows and door, and, turning off lights along the way, heads to his nest, ready to turn in for the night.

He's *exhausted*.

'Hey… Scooch over…'

He curls up in the middle of the mattress, blankets and quilts piled on top of him and bunched up around his head, the dogs creating a protective circle around him. Underbite presses herself to his belly, her nose right in his navel, and Winston lies with his head on his hips, his tail thumping when Will sleepily scratches behind his ears.

This is perfect.

Fuck you, Hannibal, he thinks, eyes already grainy and sleep stealing over him like mist. *You wanna cheat on me? Unbond me? Fine. This is my family, right here. We don't need you… We don't need anyone.*

***

To his surprise, Jack finds that Dr Frederick Chilton has booked an appointment to see him at nine o'clock the next morning, and he greets him personally at the reception desk before leading him up to his office.

'What can I do for *you*, Dr Chilton?' he asks, striding to his desk and allowing the smaller Alpha to close the door.

'It is what *I* can do for *you*,' Frederick says, all but *preening* as he limps after Jack. 'I would like to offer my services on the Ripper case. Pro bono, of course.'

Another smile. A flash of crimson irises and a low purr. Jack narrows his eyes at him as he lowers himself into his chair.

‘I see… You wish to be helpful expediting Hannibal Lecter’s arrest?’

‘I have consulted with the FBI on previous Ripper murders,’ Frederick says, his lips twisting into a quick, nervous smile.

‘You have an agenda with this case, Doctor,’ Jack reminds him, and Frederick rolls his eyes.

‘Yes, I have an *agenda*. Living.’ He sits, leaning heavily on the cane. ‘I *should* be assigned an FBI escort. Everyone who believed Will Graham about Hannibal Lecter is *dead*.’

‘Except *you*,’ Jack says, eyeing the other man down the length of his nose.

‘Except me,’ Frederick agrees, a hint of panic now straining his voice. His eyes flicker crimson again, the color sticking. ‘I would like to remain *not dead* for the foreseeable future.’

Jack nods, considering it.

‘Do you have something substantial to contribute, or just an opinion?’

‘I have a *witness*,’ Frederick says, and Jack frowns.

‘A witness?’

‘If Will is not a suspect, then he is a witness,’ Frederick replies.

‘To his own manipulation?’ Jack’s tone is cool with disbelief, and Frederick’s forehead shines with sweat, now.

‘We have had *remarkable* success recovery memory,’ he says breathlessly. ‘He remembers *so much* of what was done to him.’

‘Why hasn’t Will told me this himself?’ Jack asks, still caustically skeptical.

‘Because you told him his memories were meaningless,’ Frederick snaps, and Jack nods, chewing his lip as if fighting the urge to say something he’ll regret.

‘I imagine Hannibal Lecter used the same coercive and Heat-centric techniques on Miriam Lass that he used on Will Graham,’ Chilton continues. ‘They’re both Omegas, after all. Nuchal and estrogen manipulation is *highly* effective in creating prodromal phasing, black-outs, the like.’ His eyes gleam. ‘He buried memories in both of them.’

At Jack’s continued silence, Frederick gets frantic.

‘Jack, I *dug* those memories out of Will, I can dig them out of Miriam!’

Jack shakes his head.

‘Miriam Lass is not your patient, Doctor.’ He stands, and, ignoring the other man’s rapidly shortening breaths, walks around to show him to the door. Dismissing him. ‘But thank you, for the suggestion. Have a nice day.’

***

One of the nicest things about not being in prison is the freedom to do *what* he wants, *when* he wants.

Apart from letting the dogs out to pee and feeding them their breakfast, Will lounges around in his nest until lunchtime, re-reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, before taking another long, leisurely shower. He's only just dressed in jeans, a thick plaid shirt and jacket when there's a crunch of tires on snow, and the rumble of a van engine. The dogs bark, gathered around the door, and Will lets them out as he tugs on a pair of boots before following.

The intruder is a young Beta male, shivering in nothing more than a red short-sleeved shirt emblazoned with the logo for a specialist delivery service, trying to balance two boxes, a plastic suit hanger and a bouquet of flowers, nervously fidgeting as the dogs surround him.

Will whistles them away and shuts them inside, frowning as the delivery boy climbs up onto the porch.

'Can I help you?' Will asks, frowning at the nametag.

'Will Graham?' the Beta, "Luke", replies, sagging in relief when Will nods. He holds out the flowers, first, and Will takes them just to help the poor guy out. They smell lovely; fresh and sweet, but his eyes flash gold when he spots the curling, pretentious writing on the card, and he *knows*, immediately, who the gifts are from.

'What's in the boxes?' he snaps, dropping the flowers onto the nearest wicker chair and crossing his arms.

'Um, there's a selection of candies and chocolates, an assortment of fruit and a couple of pre-cooked meals, Sir.' Luke licks his lips, everything in his body language screaming for Will to just take the damn things and sign for the delivery like a normal person. He wriggles his shoulder and holds out the hanger. 'And a new coat.'

'Oh, for *fuck's* sake,' Will mutters. He clenches his jaw, very seriously considering rejecting it all, but the bounce in his knee tells him he'll regret sending the treats away… 'Fine. Hold on.'

Taking the boxes and hanger from Luke, Will dumps them inside for the dogs to sniff and then picks up the flowers, thrusting them back at the Beta.

'I don't want these.'

'Sir?'

Will bare his teeth and shoves them up against Luke's chest, making him stumble back a step as he hisses,

'You tell Hannibal Lecter that he's sent me enough flowers in dead men; I don't need a reminder.'

Luke nods quickly, clearly unnerved by Will's very un-Omegan behavior, and shakily points to the clipboard for a signature. Will scrawls his name on the line and then retreats into the house, waiting until the van has made its slow, sliding turn and crunched its way back down the long driveway before dropping to his knees and ripping open the box of confectionary.

'*Fuck*, Hannibal…'

There's a selection of almost every kind of popular candy, and, as Will tears into a strawberry Twizzler, rummaging one-handed through the packets of boiled sweets, gum drops and bars of chocolate, he realizes that most of this stuff remind him of his childhood. There's even an assortment of Creole pralines from Louisiana, and caramel pecans.

He groans, his mouth watering, and abandons the Twizzler for the nuts, hating how well his Alpha knows how much he's *missed* sugary foods during his incarceration.

Midway through stuffing pecans into his mouth, he hears a whine from Winston. Will turns to him, his cheeks bulging, and the dog tilts his head.

Will frowns.

'This does *not* mean I forgive him,' he says, his voice muffled. 'I just really like sugar.'

Buster interrupts him by shoving his whole head into the box, and Will clambers to his feet, carrying his precious cargo to the dining table where it will be safe. He's slower fetching the fruit, though the sight of fresh mangos is tempting.

He strips the coat, a gorgeous grey woolen herringbone creation, from its plaster hanger, and realizes there's a cashmere scarf and butter-soft leather gloves included. As tempting as it would be to throw such an expensive gift away, or give it to the dogs, Will finds himself rubbing the material between his fingers, savoring the silk lining and the luxurious fabric. A low rumble in his throat startles him, and he gulps back the rest of his purrs, shoving the thousand-collar coat into his closet because he will *not* be so easily swayed; bought by fancy gifts and small acts of kindness after so much cruelty.

'Emotionally manipulative *bastard*,' he snarls, kicking the door shut on the coat and grabbing a box of Nerds. 'Let's see what people you've cooked up for me…'

The smaller box, containing the fruit and four pre-packaged gourmet meals, is, thankfully, from a local, well-known and strictly *animal*-produce farm, and Will inspects the ingredients and cooking instructions as he places the trays into the refrigerator.

'Lamb chops, beef stroganoff, chilli and ginger salmon… sweet and sour pork loin…' He knocks back a handful of Nerds and shrugs. 'Not bad.'

His crest flares, and Will winces as he reaches back up to rub it, feeling the ridges swell under his fingertips, burning hot and tingling. His gut clenches, ass pulling up and squeezing around nothing, and the hollow *emptiness* makes the candy in his mouth taste like dust.

He needs to see Hannibal again. Soon.

‘Come on, everyone!’ he calls, shoving the Nerds into his pocket and fetching his waxed jacket and lambskin gloves from the hook by the front door. ‘Let’s go for a walk!’

***

The rest of the afternoon and evening is spent cleaning and putting everything away from the FBI raid. Will’s eyes keep wandering to his desk, to the fishing lures he used to make – *the lures Hannibal bastardized and used to frame me* – until he eventually relents and sits himself down in the old chair, breath shaking but hands steady as he lays out the first bits of kit needed to make a new lure.

He remembers visiting Abigail in his mind; standing with her in the middle of a river, the current buffeting their knees. Early morning, with birds whistling in the gold light. Feeling peaceful, and *happy.*

‘Last thing, before casting a line,’ he’d said, moving to stand behind his surrogate daughter. ‘Name the bait on your hook after somebody you cherished.’

And then he’d backed away, leaving her alone in the current, a few paces to the side so that she could cast freely.

‘To say goodbye?’ Abigail had asked, looking back at him, and Will had grinned and shrugged.

‘Well, if the person you name it after cherished *you*, as the superstition goes, you will *catch* the fish.’

‘Huh…’ Abigail had grinned, and batted her eyelashes at him, teasing him. ‘And what did *you* name it?’

Will opens his eyes, coming back to himself in his house. He stares down at the hook in his hands, wincing when pain flares, but not in his chest, as expected. He’s punctured his thumb on the sharp end, and blood wells, holly bright in the lamplight.

Bringing his finger up to his mouth, Will savors the coppery taste, and then sets the little piece of metal down, a single tear rolling down his cheek.

What am I naming the bait to catch the one that got away?

‘… Abigail.’

***

He goes to see Miriam Lass the next day.

She greets him at the door, all hunched shoulders and golden eyes, her left arm stiff where the prosthetic doesn’t hang quite right against her side. Her blond hair is scraped back, secured in a low ponytail, and she looks too small in her hooded sweater and slacks.

‘Are you an FBI agent?’ she asks, twitching and gritting her teeth to keep her voice from shaking too much.

It still wobbles.

‘Er, no,’ Will admits. ‘Uhh…’ He tries to think of the best way to describe it, rubbing his tingling fingertips together beside his thigh. ‘I used to *teach* at the Academy. And, er, two days ago, I was an *inmate* at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.’ A bitter smile, gone in a flash of gold irises. ‘Courtesy of the Chesapeake Ripper.’

My mate. The man supposed to love and protect me.

Miriam flinches at the name, and then shuffles around him, making her way towards the wooden bench and chair near the rustic coffee table.

‘Well, the guru told me the only person who had any practical understanding of the Ripper was you, but he didn’t mention that you were a victim,’ she says, and Will frowns.

‘Guru?’

Miriam lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug.

‘Jack Crawford.’

‘Oh.’ Will nods, slowly, looking away. Miriam shrugs again, still smelling of bitter, cloying fear, always flinching, even around another Omega.

‘He has a peculiar cleverness.’ She purses her lips together, as though embarrassed by her own admission.

Will nods again, chewing on his lower lip.

‘The guru tells *me* that you don’t remember much about what the Ripper did to you,’ he says, moving away to circle the other side of the table. Miriam’s scent is… uncomfortable. It makes his skin sting.

‘I couldn’t remember, either,’ he adds, and Miriam’s wide, haunted eyes brighten, even as she trembles.

‘Couldn’t?’

‘Oh, I remember now,’ Will growls. ‘Not all of it. Pieces.’ He goes to stand before the big windows near Miriam’s pristine bed. ‘I was…’ *Bonded to him… Manipulated by him… Made to go into rapid detox and heat, just so he could simulate declining mental health.* ‘… Under his influence.’

His toy.

‘He, er, used a crest brace, like a collar, to apply pressure to my neck. It’s called nuchal manipulation… He also injected me with estrogen to induce prodromal phasing,’ he explains.

‘It created blackouts and lost time.’

Time where I was entirely at his mercy… Doing whatever he wanted me to… His puppet.

‘Well…’ Miriam gulps, her throat clicking as she inches towards the bench. Towards Will. ‘I remember the collar.’ She sits down, gold-blue eyes trained on him. ‘He’d put it on, and stand in front of a light, at a distance from me, and there’d be pressure, on my neck… He was silhouetted. Very still.’

Tears well in her eyes, threatening to fall as Will lowers himself to the bench across from her.

‘He would listen to chamber music,’ Miriam continues, nodding and pulling a face at how *weird* it was. ‘I still hear *that*.’

You’re waking now…

‘I was so *hot*,’ she whispers, gaze distant as she revisits something only she can see. ‘And his voice, low and even, would pull me to him…’

Waking in a pleasant room… Safe…

‘Like a current.’

You’re waking now… Waking, calm… Waking in a pleasant room… Safe…

As she stares off to the side, Miriam’s throat rattles with a low, satisfied purr, the sound of it sending shivers down Will’s spine. She doesn’t even realize how *relaxed* she looks, thinking about what was done to her.

How she was Gentled to the point of madness.

‘You and I are… part of his design,’ Will murmurs, looking over at her, blue eyes haunted. Miriam is so very *young*, after all. And so very, very broken.

He blinks away his own tears, and ducks his head, offering her a crooked smile.

‘He *wanted* you to be free,’ he says softly, his heart tightening into a vice and skipping a beat as he thinks of his Alpha. Of Hannibal’s decision to kill the judge, and risk exposure; to finally let the Ripper take credit for the Copycat murders… ‘He wanted *me* to be free, too.’

He misses me, as much as I miss him. Perhaps more.

‘Neither of us are really *free*,’ Miriam says, voice tight and cheeks blotchy. ‘He’s not *done*.’

No, Will thinks, his brows drawing down into a frown. *But neither am I.*

***

Done at last with his final client of the day, Hannibal heads straight for the kitchen when he arrives home. He needs a glass of wine after such a torrent of self-pitying drivel. A married

Beta, incapable of fidelity despite her husband's good fortune and utter devotion to her, *insisting* on seeking pity and forgiveness for her actions.

Hannibal is working on twisting her narcissism into paranoid sociopathy, but it will take time.

He drops his keys onto the island and collects a glass from the side counter, pausing at the door to the refrigerator when an acrid smell assaults his nose.

At last.

'The same unfortunate aftershave,' he says, throwing a smirk over his shoulder. 'Too long in the bottle.'

Will emerges from the shadows, golden eyes glowing in the darkness, coated in the scent his Alpha so detests.

As Hannibal opens the fridge door, bathing them in the soft light, he raises his gun.

Hannibal's smile fades, and his eyes flicker red with worry. Will has become… unpredictable, since his incarceration.

'Our last kitchen conversation was interrupted by Jack Crawford,' Will says, keeping the revolver trained on his mate. 'I'd like to pick up where we left off. If memory serves, you were asking me if it would feel good to kill you.'

Wary of moving too fast and spooking the Omega, Hannibal settles for adjusting his weight more evenly onto his feet, turning to face him and swallowing the low growl caught in his throat.

'You've given that some thought,' he murmurs, making the other man quiver.

'You wanted me to embrace my *nature*, Doctor,' Will snarls. 'I'm just following the *urges* I kept down for so long… Cultivating them as the inspirations they are.'

That's my boy…

'You never answered my question,' Hannibal says, looking deep into Will's gold-ringed eyes. 'How would killing me make you feel?'

There's a moment, a *second*, where Will seems to falter, and then he bares his teeth, and takes aim at Hannibal's face.

'Righteous,' he hisses, making the Alpha flinch, heart hammering as he prepares himself for a bullet.

For death.

'Aren't you curious, Will?' Hannibal's voice is soft, strained with a hint of desperation. He is afraid, and he wants Will to see it. To know that he has the power, here, in this moment. 'Why you? Why Miriam Lass? What does the Chesapeake Ripper want with you?'

‘Oh, *you* tell *me*,’ Will snaps, still shaking, his arms burning where he’s locked rigid, pointing the barrel right into Hannibal’s face. His brains would spatter the walls and get stuck in the crevices of the ceiling if he were to pull the trigger…

Hannibal remains silent, unwilling to give himself away, and Will takes a shuddering breath, adjusting his sweaty grip.

‘How did Miriam Lass *find* you?’ he asks, his voice shaking. ‘You made sure *no-one* could find you that way again.’

Hannibal’s heart beats in desperate defiance of the threat. It batters his ribcage, flooding his body with adrenaline. He can smell himself slipping into rut; his eyes prickle as the irises warm to red, throwing Will’s body into sharp relief against the gloom. His muscles contract, preparing to flee or fight, and his already-honed senses sharpen still further.

Will smells *glorious*; wildfire and honey, sugar musk and blood. His skin, pale from weeks locked inside, glows silver in the darkness, giving him an eerie, ethereal quality, and heat ripples the air before him as pregnancy, anger and arousal spike his temperature several degrees higher than normal.

But it is the *sound* of him that chokes Hannibal. The heavy thud of his own heart, pulsing with life even as he threatens to end his mate’s. The rasp of his breath as he fights tears; the click of his throat as he gulps back whimpers. The rattle of bullets in the chamber where his hand trembles on the gun.

The faint thrumming of their baby’s heartbeat, as it kicks a rapid staccato from deep inside Will’s body.

‘If I’m not the Ripper, you murder an innocent man,’ Hannibal pleads, working hard to keep his voice steady, even as a single thought swirls in his mind like a prayer.

Don’t kill me, Will. Please don’t kill me, yet.

‘You, better than anyone know what it means to be wrongly accused.’ He sets his wineglass down, pitching his voice low. Trying to soothe him. ‘You were innocent, and no-one saw it.’

‘No, I’m not innocent,’ Will replies, a tear rolling down his cheek when he shakes his head. ‘You saw to that.’

Hannibal tries another tact.

‘If I *am* the Ripper, and you kill me, who will answer your questions?’ He waits, watching the way Will’s jaw works, and his eyes narrow as he considers it. Hannibal risks a shrug, extended his arms a fraction wider. ‘Don’t you want to know how this ends?’

Will tilts his head, his breath catching. Black fire pulses through his veins, making him light as air. Stronger than he’s *ever* felt. He’s drunk with it, *dizzy* from the euphoria.

I could pull the trigger and end it all, right now… I’m the one in charge, here.

Gasping a grin, his mouth watering in anticipation of the act, the sudden *moment* when all of Hannibal's schemes and cruel games might *stop*, Will steps up to him and shoves the gun right into his face.

And Hannibal, his pristine, elegant Alpha, who *so* favors his control, shrinks back and closes his eyes, throat bobbing as he makes a sound suspiciously like a *whimper* at the tell-tale nock of a bullet sliding into the camber.

God…

Will is so hard it hurts.

'Get on your knees,' he whispers, grinding the barrel into Hannibal's cheekbone. 'Face me.'

Hannibal shivers, sinking to the tiled floor without question. He opens his eyes to see Will smirking, and winces when the gun digs into his face as Will gets even closer.

'You locked me in a cage for six *weeks*, Hannibal.' Will stands over his Alpha, adjusting the gun so that it is pressed to Hannibal's temple. 'Did you really think a couple of boxes of candy and a *coat* would make me forgive you?'

'I don't expect you to forgive me, Will.'

'Shut up!' Will grabs Hannibal's jaw in his free hand, crushing his chin, and leans down to capture his mouth in a bruising kiss. His body ignites, hips jumping forwards even as his jeans dent his cock. Hannibal tastes like stale coffee and *copper*, like a hunter, like *home*, and Will screws his eyes tight shut as he presses their lips together, again and again. 'I hate you. I hate you *so* much right now.'

Hannibal reaches up to cup Will's face, to slide his fingers through his Omega's curls, but a low growl stops him, and he finds himself shoved back hard enough to make glass jars clink in the refrigerator.

Will steps back, still aiming the gun at Hannibal's face.

'Take your clothes off,' he says, quirking an eyebrow when the other man frowns in confusion. 'Is there a *problem*, Hannibal?'

Hannibal swallows, fear and excitement swirling in an intoxicating blend in the pit of his stomach. Ignoring the pain in his knees, he shrugs out of his woolen coat and lets it drop to the side, crimson eyes locked onto gold as the suit jacket follows.

Will's breath catches when Hannibal removes his vest and cufflinks. He holds out his hand for the tie, gesturing with the gun for the Alpha to continue unbuttoning his shirt.

'Everything,' he says, soft and dangerous, when Hannibal pauses at the button of his trousers. 'You're not dignified in this moment, *Dr Lecter*. You're just *mine*.'

Hannibal's chest shrinks a fraction, and his fingers tremble on the zipper.

I am yours. I promise.

He eases the zip down, aching with arousal, utterly captivated by the dangerous gleam to his Omega's stare. Pushes his trousers down his thighs, boxers following, wobbling and nearly falling as he tries to toe off his shoes.

'Get up,' Will murmurs, gesturing with the gun again as he shows mercy. 'Stand and take everything else off. *Silently*,' he adds, when Hannibal looks ready to open his mouth.

Quivering with anticipation and from the cold air on his sensitive flesh, Hannibal rises to his feet, deftly removing everything else until he is naked before his mate, hard and proud and waiting. He sees Will wet his lips, golden eyes skating over his heaving chest, the thatch greying hair and down, to fix hungrily on his curving erection, which swells further under the scrutiny.

'Walk.' Will nods to the doorway, to the rest of the house, and Hannibal's breath catches. He raises his hands, surrendering to his Omega, and releases a slow, shaking breath when he turns his back on the gun.

He's not sure if he's more scared or aroused… Will is so unbelievably handsome like this. All he wants to do is cover him with his body and lavish affection on him until they both come screaming. But Will has given an explicit instruction, and Hannibal will follow it.

He will do *anything* Will wants.

'Upstairs,' Will says, divesting himself of his jacket as he follows the naked Alpha into the entrance hall. 'The bedroom.'

Not your bedroom. Our bedroom. Yours and mine. Where you fucked Alana, you piece of shit.

Hannibal swallows, grateful for the plush carpet replacing cold marble under his feet. Will is barely three steps behind him, gun still up, the acrid stench of metal too sharp in the otherwise sweet air. He enters the room first, eyes dropping to the navy covers and white sheets, his stomach lurching with relief that he changed the bedding immediately after Alana left.

The room smells of him, and him alone.

'*Turn*,' Will growls, freezing Hannibal in place. He obeys slowly, lowering his hands to his sides, the first flicker of unease crackling up his spine when Will squares his jaw and aims at his face again.

'Will…'

'I didn't say you could *speak,* Dr Lecter.' Will nudges the barrel against Hannibal's lips, quirking an eyebrow at the stifled sound of distress from the other man. He smirks, quick and cold, and then flicks the tie out at his side, unspooling the silk to trail down his leg.

'Blindfold yourself,' he says, handing the tie to his Alpha and humming his satisfaction when Hannibal hesitantly follows his instruction.

Slipping into darkness, Hannibal's skin prickles as his other senses sharpen to compensate for his missing eyesight. He can smell Will's sweet, smoky musk, and the sharp syrup of his slick far more strongly now, and feel the heat radiating from him, bathing the bare skin on his chest and abdomen, leaving his back chilled.

'Lie on the bed,' Will whispers, placing a hand flat to Hannibal's shoulder and guiding him down. He helps arrange the other man to stretch out, his head nestled between the pillows, hands to either side of his face, legs slightly spread.

Hannibal holds his breath, conscious of every thread against his skin, the whisper of velvet and silk beneath his buttocks, and the shifting air brushing his exposed genitals, made all the colder for the glistening beads of moisture gathering at the tip of his throbbing length.

Will's sharp instructions and insistence on silence is breathtakingly erotic.

Staring at his mate, lying where he's placed him, makes Will's chest hurt, but his balls are so tight to his body he might come in his pants if he's not careful. And he's slick; he's so, *so* slick, wetting his boxers and dribbling down his legs at the idea of being with his Alpha again.

Of feeling Hannibal's knot inside him again.

'You make a sound before I tell you, I'll shove this so far up your ass you'll be shitting bullets for a week,' he snarls, earning a full-body shudder from the other man which, in turn, makes *him* shudder.

Will's fingers feel fat and useless as he fumbles to undo his shirt, and he hears threads snap in his haste to get undressed. He kicks his boots and socks off, shimmying out of his jeans and boxers, his body igniting at the idea of feeling Hannibal's skin on his again.

And then he's clambering on top of the Alpha, their chest and leg hair rasping together, erections drawn like magnets and brushing with such sweet, sharp pleasure at the damp *heat* of it that Will groans, and Hannibal's nails cut bloody half-moons into his palms as he bites his lower lip to silence himself.

'*Alpha…*' Will rests the gun, cold and heavy and frightening, on Hannibal's chest, leaning down to catch both swollen lips between his own teeth, nipping and sucking and licking until Hannibal is panting hard, on the *verge* of growling, sliding his tongue in and out of Will's mouth as they meet kiss for kiss.

'You speak when I say you speak,' Will reminds him, scraping the fingers of his free hand through Hannibal's hair and yanking his head back, forcing his mate to bare his throat in submission. The other man's throat catches around an unconscious sound, a primal whine of surrender, which Will both allows and revels in, lifting his leg to straddle Hannibal's hips and happily smearing glistening slick over his pelvis. 'You're *mine*,' he purrs, grinding his hardness down against Hannibal's, sucking the thick, heavy musk rising between them, sharp with Hannibal's desire. '*This*, is mine.'

He leaves the gun where it is, balanced between Hannibal's pectorals, right over his heartbeat, and slips his right hand to the throbbing erection beneath his own, roughly palming the pulsing shaft before pushing back the silky skin from the bundle of zinging nerves at the tip, rubbing circles and stroking the blushing red before pressing his own to it in a twisted, erotic parody of a kiss.

The sound that Hannibal turns his face to the pillow to hide is *exquisite*, settling like a branding iron on Will's swollen crest and releasing another flood of hot slick. He jerks on Hannibal's hair again, making him wince in pain, but the distraction is temporary because, a moment later, Will is sitting up, balanced on his knees and reaching behind him to take hold of Hannibal's length and guide him inside his body.

Oh… This… This is home.

Behind the blindfold, Hannibal squeezes his eyes tight shut, pushing a tear to trickle across his temple and into his hairline. There's a moment of resistance and then he's *in*, sucked deep into the smooth channel, coated in tingling wet heat and fast slipping towards rut. He holds his breath, his heart hammering beneath the warning weight of the firearm, shoulders cramping as he flexes his muscles against unseen bonds. His blood rushes through his veins, burning him from the inside, but it's *nothing* compared to the blistering heat engulfing his erection, squeezed and pressed by as Will lowers himself to take it all inside him once again.

Hannibal can feel himself shattering apart, piece by piece, and there's nothing he can do about it.

Hissing at the stretch, the *ache* of being filled again, after so long without his mate, Will concentrates on rolling his hips as he sinks down onto Hannibal's pelvis, trembling at the *fullness* of it, the pressure of the flesh inside him, the bristle of coarse hair on his sensitive skin and the heat of balls under his ass cheeks.

A low, gruff purr rumbles from deep inside him, unbidden and unstoppable, and Will feels a tear roll down his cheek as he lifts his face to the ceiling.

He's missed Hannibal *so much*.

'Tell me you're mine,' he gasps, groping for the gun and pressing the safety catch into place before shoving it at the bedside table, needing it to be away from them. '*Say* it, Hannibal!'

'I'm yours,' Hannibal whispers, turning his face towards Will's when his Omega seeks out his lips. He shudders again, hips jumping up as Will begins to move, a slow, deep slide in and out, relishing every inch of him. 'I'm yours, my love; I'm yours.'

'I can't get away from you.' Will's voice hitches in a sob and he rakes his nails down Hannibal's chest, raising half a dozen angry red welts, most of which glisten with beads of blood. 'You're always with me, always *in* me.'

'Please, Will…' Hannibal yanks against the invisible restraints, skin stretched tight over the roped muscles, and Will snarls as he grabs for Hannibal's hands, twining their fingers together and shoving down, hard, onto him, riding him with abandonment.

‘I *hate* that I need you!’ Will sinks his teeth into Hannibal’s bottom lip, shaking his head until he tastes more blood. ‘I *hate* this fucking bond!’

‘I love you,’ Hannibal breathes, reaching up and cupping the back of Will’s hair, massaging his scalp and savoring the weight of his curls. ‘I would do anything for you.’

‘You’re sick,’ Will snarls, sweat dribbling down the notches of his spine to settle in the dimples above his clenching ass. ‘You betrayed me.’

‘I have only ever wanted to… *ah*… To help you,’ Hannibal manages, bending his knees to give himself more power to thrust into Will’s spasming body. His own gut is coiled tight as a spring, his throat choked with a resonating purr, hands stroking up and down Will’s arms, tracing across tight shoulders to massage the stiff nipples on his tender chest.

Will quivers at the aching pleasure spilling from such a little touch, stoking the already raging inferno inside him. He can feel himself leaking onto Hannibal’s stomach, and he groans when he looks down and sees it, smeared there in the line of hairs disappearing between his legs.

‘*Fuck*... I’m… I’m gonna come,’ he mutters, fingers clenching and unclenching across Hannibal’s chest, tears falling freely now as the pleasure spikes high, blinding him in white. ‘I’m gonna come.’

‘Let me see you,’ Hannibal begs, surging upwards from the bed to sit, clutching Will tight to him even as he rocks up into the scalding tightness, the fine hairs rising when Will keens, high and breathy, scrabbling to undo the tie blinding him.

The moment Hannibal *sees* him, his pink cheeks and flushed, swollen lips, glistening eyes and creased brow, his resolve very nearly crumbles and it physically hurts him to remain passive, only his adoration for Will keeping him from pushing his mate down onto all fours and rutting into him until the world hears their screams.

‘Fuck…’ Will growls, his thighs shaking as he chases his pleasure, cresting higher and higher and higher until it peaks, and spills over into something *so much better*. ‘Fuck! *Fuck*, Hannibal, *fuck!’*

Grabbing him tight, he lavishes kisses across his Alpha’s face; his high cheekbones and cruel lips, his sharp nose and pale brows, still rocking, still juddering as his body soars on wave after wave of climax, their bellies spattered with his release.

And Hannibal *purrs*, kissing him in return, nuzzling under his jaw and scenting him, two broad palms pressed flat between his shoulder-blades, cradling him as close as possible, still hard inside him.

Waiting for permission to come.

Will whimpers when sharp teeth graze his scent glands, feeling them swell in response to his Alpha’s questing tongue. He can smell how close Hannibal is; feel the fluttering pulse in his erection, and taste the salt of the tears that trickle silently from crimson eyes.

For just a second, he considers leaving. Denying Hannibal. Again. But, even as the thought sparks, it burns out, and he gazes into his mate's face, memorizing every wrinkle, every pore, every fleck of stubble before he kisses him.

'I want to feel you come inside me,' he whispers, locking eyes with his Alpha, lips and noses brushing as he begins to move again, slowly and carefully, tremors wracking him with every rub of his prostate. '*Ohhh*... oh, *fuck,* Hannibal…'

'I love you,' Hannibal breathes, hugging Will close as soon as Will closes his eyes. He gathers him into his arms, sucking a mark of ownership into the creamy skin of his neck, right over his thundering artery, enfolding him in his strong arms and his heavy scent. 'I'm yours, Will.'

'Come for me,' Will pants, writhing against him, squeezing and pushing and pulling and clenching, and endlessly different pattern designed to trigger a knot. 'Come for me, Alpha. Please.'

Hannibal growls, just once, his hand suddenly rising to grip Will's crest. He pinches the ridges tight, flooding Will's body with heat and fresh endorphins. Will's eyes fly open, sightless as he spirals, headlong, into another orgasm, ripped apart until he's nothing but light and sound and air once more.

Alive. So very much alive.

'Will…'

Hannibal's fingers dig bruises into his Omega's bicep, and he sinks his teeth into Will's skin as he snaps his hips two, three more times, his entire body freezing at the moment of release, as deep and as far inside him as he can be without flaying him open.

I'm yours, he vows, suckling on the honeyed copper of his blood, both men shaking with the strength of their pleasure, dizzy with the emotions behind the reunion, locked together as Will's body takes the knot and holds it tight. *And you're mine, Will. Forever.*

***

It takes nearly an hour for their bodies to separate. More than enough time for regret to creep into every fiber of Will's being and fill him with a sense of cold disgust.

Hannibal has shifted them so that they are spooning, with Will on his normal side of the bed, facing the window. He drifts in the calming aftershocks of climax, each muscle relaxing until he is boneless and light in his mate's arms. Hannibal's soft purrs are felt more than heard, the deep rumbles vibrating through from the Alpha's broad chest to Will's back, echoed by his own higher replies, despite his best efforts to silence them.

'I love your hair like this,' Hannibal murmurs, snuffling at Will's shaggy curls. 'Did you try the coat?'

‘I threw it out,’ Will lies, impatient to be free of the other man’s anatomy so he can leave. Wash away the evidence of his weakness. ‘I told you; a coat and some treats aren’t going to make me forgive you.’

‘It was not to earn your forgiveness,’ Hannibal says, arms curling a fraction more possessively around Will’s body; one beneath his neck, the other around his waist, a palm pressed against his flat belly.

Not flat for long…

‘Yeah, well, the dogs appreciated the meat from those stupid package meals,’ Will growls. Another lie, but worth it to try and irritate the other man.

His psychopath.

His cannibal.

‘Will…’ Hannibal’s dismay, his *disappointment* that Will isn’t taking care of himself – because, through their godforsaken bond, Will *knows* that’s what it is; that Hannibal has no care for his gift being rejected, or Will hurting him, but that he wants to look after his mate – makes Will’s heartbeat sharp as a knife behind his ribs, triggering a high, keening whimper in his throat and bringing tears to his eyes.

It’s so pathetic. So *Omegan*.

‘Shut up,’ he hisses, screwing his face up and biting his knuckles. ‘Just… *stop* talking.’

Thankfully, his Alpha subsides, though he does insist on stroking up and down the length of Will’s arm and side, raising goosebumps in his wake but filling Will with a warm, gentle sense of peace.

I can’t do this.

The moment Hannibal slips free of Will’s body, he’s scrambling to get out of the luxurious and ridiculously overstuffed bed, tracking down his abandoned clothes and carrying them all into the adjoining bathroom to shower and dress.

‘*Don’t* follow me,’ he warns, slamming the door shut behind him and sliding the latch across for good measure. His parting glimpse of Hannibal, bereft in the middle of the bed with anxious eyes fixed on him, sears his brain before he presses his back to the door, and Will chokes on a shaking breath as he sinks to the floor.

Fuck.

His heart is thundering, his lungs are three sizes too small and his stomach is roiling, and he knows *exactly* why he’s so anxious.

Because he’s *leaving*.

Growling under his breath, Will shoves himself to his feet and stomps to the shower, fiddling with the dials until the water can blast away any lingering trace of remorse.

He can't stay. He *won't* stay.

His throat catches when he sees a selection of expensive Omegan body washes and shampoos; Hannibal clearly realizes that he isn't going to want to smell like him for a while, and that they won't be sharing the same products until they are on better terms.

Huffing to himself, angry that he's even *indulging* the idea that they might reconcile, Will sniffs each bottle to find his favorite and then lathers himself with suds, taking extra effort to rinse away *any* trace of Hannibal's seed from between his legs so that his Alpha cannot leave this house with him.

You're not welcome in my home, yet.

He only stops when his skin is scrubbed pink and the tender flesh behind his balls is stinging protest at the abrasive cleaning. Will winces as he rinses himself off, and steps out of the shower on trembling legs. In a moment of childish petulance, he shakes his head like a dog, feeling a twinge of satisfaction at the droplets of water spattering Hannibal's large, smear-free mirrors.

It'll drive the neat-freak crazy.

He dries off and dresses as fast as he can. He's already left the dogs with the sitter for longer than expected, and she'll have dropped them off at home an hour ago.

Emerging into the bedroom, Will is surprised to find Hannibal still in bed where he left him, dark eyes trained on the bathroom door, covers pooled around his waist as he waits, obediently, for permission to move.

If only you asked permission to kill people, Will thinks, glaring at him. *How many lives I could save…*

He shoves a wet-black curl from his face and pulls his glasses from his jacket pocket, lips twisting into a half-smirk at the flash of disappointment on his Alpha's face.

'You don't have to hide yourself from me,' Hannibal murmurs, swinging his long legs out of the bed and rising to his full, naked glory.

Will's breath catches at the sight; Hannibal's lean, toned muscles, taut and ready to attack. He has a hunter's physique; trim and strong, without excess. Slender hands, which have cherished and hurt him in equal measures… A golden, unmarked neck, his throat bobbing around a swallow even as poisonous words slither from his lips.

'I see you, Will.' Hannibal's voice is low and insistent, sparking a dangerous flame that curls inside Will's chest and threatens to dismantle him. 'I've *always* seen exactly who you are.'

'You see who you *want* me to be,' Will replies, surprising himself by how low and plaintive his voice sounds.

How sad.

Words jostle against his teeth, desperate to tumble from his mouth and be returned in kind. He wants so badly to *talk* with Hannibal again, to share his thoughts and feelings with the other man, and learn about Hannibal in return. To slide into the darkness, just for a *moment*, and imagine how good it would feel to be free…

But he can't. He *can't*.

'I have to go,' he mutters, ducking his head and striding for the door.

Hannibal's nostrils flare and he catches the salty smell of distress. Will is upset, by his own actions, this time. In three strides he intercedes his mate, gathering the Omega up into his arms and blocking his escape.

Will's head comes up, the gold of his eyes dulled behind the tinted glasses. His spine prickles, and antlers burst free of his skin, razor sharp and desperate for blood, shredding his clothes as they reach for Hannibal's jugular.

He bares his teeth at the Alpha, squirming an arm free, and shoves him back even as he swings for him. There's a crack of skin on skin, burning bright in Will's palm, and he watches Hannibal fall back as he smacks him across the face.

'*Don't* touch me!'

Hannibal's heart skips a beat and he staggers, his cheek and nose smarting, eyes watering and ear ringing, shock momentarily robbing him of his senses.

Will hit him *hard*.

He coughs a laugh, pressing his fingers to the blood welling on his cut lip, and grins at the smaller man. Will is frozen, appalled by his own actions, heart hammering and fingers already reaching to soothe his damaged mate.

'*Hannibal*…'

'I'm alright,' Hannibal murmurs, coming closer again, dipping his head towards Will when the smaller man tilts up to kiss him.

What the fuck am I doing?

Will rears back, nails digging into his palms as he clenches his fists and stumbles away. He shakes his head, eyes wild and mouth bitter with disgust at what he's doing.

What he's *becoming*.

'Stay away from me!' he gasps, falling through the doorway and running as fast as he can from the house.

He can't do this.

***

At nine o'clock in the morning, two years earlier, Miriam Lass had shown up to his office, a fresh-faced and eager trainee, desperate to impress Jack Crawford. Now, when Hannibal permits her entry, she does so flanked by Jack himself, their faces severe in their contemplations.

Jack, alas, still harbors resentment and suspicion. Miriam, his sweet Omegan girl, is scared; memories twisted and manipulated during her time with him, but she steels herself well, squaring her shoulders in the large overcoat she has been given.

She looks better in black than she did in that lacey, white doll dress.

'I would have been happy to come to *your* office, Jack,' Hannibal says, eyeing Miriam as she wanders towards his drawing desk, just as she did before. It's been less than twenty-four hours since Will came to him, threatened him with a gun and then mated with him, strengthening their bond through physical connection, and Hannibal still has slick on his skin. It warms him; protects him. Soothes him against the continued animosity.

'I understand,' Jack replies, hunching his shoulders and shoving his hands deep into his pockets. 'But I wanted to do this here.'

I wanted to test out a theory.

The truth is loud as a scream; a primal roar of challenge, and it takes all of Hannibal's self-control to keep his voice smooth, his scent smooth and his eyes from flashing red.

Jack is *really* starting to annoy him.

'I'm sure you have your reasons,' he says coolly. He nods towards Miriam. 'The most important aspect to a successful recovery is recognizing that life will never be the same.'

'Then I must be well on my way to a successful recovery,' Miriam mutters, her heart hammering and brows drawing down into a scowl as she reaches for an exquisitely detailed drawing of the Wound Man. As she slides the paper aside, she sees that it's actually a sketch of a man.

Soft footsteps behind her make her nape prickle, and she flinches away when Hannibal comes to stand by her side.

'It's beautiful,' she says, jerking her head to the drawings. 'Yours?'

'Yes.' Hannibal smiles at her, his eyes warm with pride. 'I enjoy portraiture.'

I've drawn you many times, my dear. Almost as many times as I've drawn Will, and I've known you far longer.

'A subject's mental process betrayed only by the emotion on their face.'

‘Miriam,’ Jack calls, drawing her attention back to himself. She and Hannibal look over simultaneously. ‘The Chesapeake Ripper sent me a message from you. It was recorded after you were taken.’

‘It’s me?’ Miriam’s eyes flicker gold, her throat bobbing around a gulp. ‘My voice?’

‘Yes.’

Miriam fixes her gaze on Jack’s hand. On the cell phone she knows is held there.

‘I wanna hear it.’

Jack glances at his fellow Alpha, as though conferring, but there’s no question there. No hesitation. He’d been expecting the request. Counting on it.

As manipulative as ever, Hannibal thinks, watching his interaction with the Omega with growing distaste. *No wonder you had Will wrapped around your little finger.*

‘Very well,’ Jack says, pulling out the little phone and opening it at the recording.

How convenient… Hannibal refuses to allow his eyes to narrow at such an obvious ploy – Jack is nothing if not bullish brawn – but Miriam doesn’t seem to care about the overhanded technique.

There’s a click, and then the recording plays. Miriam hears her own voice, high and frightened, laced with Omegan distress, playing from the cell phone.

‘Jack, it’s Miriam… I don’t know where I am… I can’t *see* anything… I was so wrong. I was so *wrong*… Please, Jack…’ A hitched sob and a whimper, cutting through them all like glass. ‘I don’t wanna die like this!’

Miriam’s eyes are wide and flooded gold, brimming with tears. She purses her lips, her jaw clenched hard enough to grind her back teeth, and she fights back a high keen of distress.

‘I don’t remember,’ she mumbles, shaking her head, searching for a way out of the hell inside her head.

Jack nods, disappointed, and then looks at Hannibal.

A challenge, born of his suspicions.

Very well.

You’re not the master here, Jack. I am.

‘Would you like to try?’ Hannibal asks, pitching his voice to be low and soothing, drawing Miriam’s fractured attention back to him and grounding her in his scent. ‘It will require you to wear a crest brace –’

‘I don’t have a crest,’ Miriam interrupts, as though worried it’ll stop them from trying. Hannibal merely smiles.

‘The manipulation works just as well on an unmarked nape,’ he promises.

Miriam steels herself, squaring her tiny shoulders and gulping back a whimper.

‘I wanna try,’ she whispers, wide eyes fixed on Hannibal’s face.

He allows himself a single, comforting purr.

That’s my girl.

‘This way,’ he murmurs, leading her by the elbow to Will’s leather armchair. ‘Now, if you’ll sit for me. I’ll prepare the brace.’

Miriam holds very still when Hannibal slips the butter-soft leather collar around her throat, and he is careful to tighten the metal ring in slow degrees, pinching the skin on the back of her neck to simulate a crest, catching the sensitive nerve endings and inducing a compliant, hypnotic state.

The Omega’s breath catches at the first touch of the metal, and then eases into slow, steady puffs as she submits to Hannibal’s control, her body flooded with dopamine.

‘Your eyes are heavy,’ Hannibal murmurs, pressing his fingertips to her eyelids so that she closes her eyes. ‘*So* heavy… As you sink deeper, your body becomes heavy. Fully relaxed… Follow the sound of my voice, and let yourself go.’

Will fought this every step of the way. How interesting it would be to repeat the action with his Heat safely behind him.

‘*That’s* it,’ Hannibal breathes, cupping Miriam’s cheek to mark her with his scent before retreating to his own chair. The Omega is perfectly still, calm but for the faint crease between her eyebrows as her mind tells her she’s done this before. That this is a layer within a layer.

We’ve practiced this so many times.

‘You’re waking now,’ Hannibal says, sitting forwards with his elbows on his knees and hands clasped before him. He refuses to acknowledge Jack’s looming presence between them; the other Alpha is stood by the couch in front of the window, hands in his pockets and face etched into a deep scowl as he watches Hannibal work with Miriam.

The smell of rut adds a tang of fire to the air.

‘Walking. Calm.’ Hannibal keeps his voice low, drawing Miriam up within the reconstruction. The phrases are important; the intonation more so. This is all part of her conditioning. ‘Waking in a pleasant room. Safe.’

Here we go…

‘Open your eyes,’ Hannibal says, and Miriam obeys. Her irises are fully gold, bright with innocence and all the lighter for the pinprick pupils. She blinks, but her gaze is glassy and unfocused. What she sees is not in this room, but a memory.

A fantasy.

‘Jack,’ she gasps, the same fear in her voice as on the cell phone recording. ‘Jack, it’s Miriam.’

‘Tell me where you are,’ Hannibal says, and Miriam whimpers.

‘I don’t know where I am.’

‘What do you see?’ Hannibal asks, his own eyes warming to maroon as the Omega’s scent thickens with salty distress.

‘I… I can’t *see* anything,’ Miriam sobs, a tear rolling down her cheek. Despite her terror, she is paralyzed; trapped by the brace. Trapped by the illusion. In her mind’s eye, the shadow of an Alpha stands before her, hidden in light, controlling her.

‘I was so *wrong*,’ Miriam whispers, her throat catching around a mewl. ‘Jack, please… I don’t wanna die like this!’

‘Miriam,’ Hannibal calls, grounding her in his voice and soothing her fear. ‘What was the *last* thing you remember before making the call?’

Miriam gulps, more tears falling freely now. She grips the armrest tight and manages to look over towards Jack, gazing at his shadowed outline, at the weapons impaling every part of him, shining before a halo of truth…

She remembers. She remembers seeing it. Knowing what it means.

‘The Wound Man.’

***

After settling Miriam back into her rooms on campus, Jack heads down to the BSU lab to get an update on the Tree Man from Price and Zeller, collecting Alana on the way so that they can update the psychological profile of the Ripper with any new evidence gleaned from the victim.

‘We found a fingerprint on a flower petal,’ Price says, launching straight into the findings with no preamble. ‘A partial. Smudged. Not enough points for a courtroom, but it triggered a match in the system.’

Zeller moves away from the screen as the results load, and Price nods to the record it brings up.

‘Hannibal Lecter.’

A stunned silence greets the news. Alana glances up at Jack, chewing her lower lip in worry. Zeller snorts, and comes to stand on Price's other side.

'After all these murders, the Ripper's gonna leave a print *now?'* He shakes his head in disbelief.

'Will said whatever evidence we found, it would lead *away* from the Ripper,' Jack says, dark eyes taking in the fingerprint match and his colleagues. Zeller hums, and flicks through the pages of the file before him.

'We also found sodium amytal and excessive estrogen in Miriam's blood,' he says, gesturing to the Omega's test results.

'Dr *Chilton* used estrogen,' Alana says, her blue eyes widening in fearful realization. '*And* sodium amytal on both Gideon *and* Will during their therapy.'

Zeller frowns, horror plain on his face as he considers the ramifications of giving an Alpha *and* an Omega excessive estrogen.

'One claimed to be the Chesapeake Ripper, and the other accused Hannibal,' Alana continues, looking to Jack for support.

Jack nods slowly, growling under his breath.

'"You've got the right box, but you're looking in the wrong corner"…' At Zeller's confused frown and Price's narrowed eyes, Jack explains, 'Gideon *pointed* me at Chilton. Told me that he was the Ripper.'

'Wait, I'm confused,' Price says, his expression perfectly mirrored by Zeller's. 'So, who are we saying is the Chesapeake Ripper? Dr *Lecter* or Dr Chilton?'

Jack glances at Alana, who sets her jaw in silent rebuke of his continued suspicions. In her mind, it *has* to be Chilton.

The Alpha huffs, chewing on his tongue.

'Bring 'em both in.'

***

Having decided to take the afternoon off work, Frederick treats himself to an avocado and baby spinach salad at his favorite restaurant, and then drives home to change for golf. The Mayor is rumored to be teeing off at two o'clock, and he would be amiss if he didn't join him and perhaps discuss the issue of increasing much-needed funds for the hospital.

Upon entering his home, the normally fresh scents of lavender and lemon from his housekeeper's efforts are muted, hidden beneath a faint layer of something else. Something unusual… Chilton, busy checking for a confirmation e-mail on his tablet, doesn't place it at first, and it is the beeping that catches his attention.

It sounds like a heart monitor.

Walking through the kitchen, past one of the sitting rooms and into the cubby, Frederick tracks the beeping to the stairs. He frowns, leaning heavily on his cane, his palm tingling and growing slick with sweat as unease nibbles at his stomach.

The steps are difficult to navigate; one of the reasons he hasn't been down to the wine cellar in weeks. Frederick's heart beats twice as fast as the blip of the monitor, and, as he reaches the bottom of the staircase, the beeping changes to a continuous tone.

That's not good…

Opening the door to a storage room, Frederick *feels* his eyes widen to crimson discs as he stares at the scene before him.

Dr Abel Gideon, or, rather more accurately, Gideon's *torso*, bereft of arms and legs, lies on a medical gurney, recently deceased if the shrill whining of the heart monitor is any indication.

There are steel shelves around the room, containing all manner of surgical gear, and, across the bed, a saw appears to be halfway through dissecting Abel's remaining calf muscle into joints of meat.

Oh, fuck.

Panic chokes him, and Frederick throws himself backwards out of the room. He drops his cane; his fingers numb as terror takes him by the throat and propels him back up the stairs.

He has to get out of here, *now*.

Two Louis Vuitton suitcases block his way, and Frederick, in his haste, goes flying as he trips over them. He lands, the impact smacking the air from his lungs, right in front of a pair of plastic-wrapped shoes.

Hannibal's shoes.

Oh, God… No…

'Hello, Frederick.'

Hannibal smiles down at the smaller Alpha, his suit covered in the protective plastic, hair slicked back and hands covered in three layers of vinyl gloves.

Frederick stares up at him, mind spinning like tires on ice as he tries to process just exactly what he's seeing.

No… No, this can't be real… This can't be happening… Not to me.

'Oh my God.'

Two dark shapes appear at the frosted glass of his front door. A hand is raised, knuckles rapping sharply. Frederick feels a sudden flare of hope, of relief, because surely, *surely* Hannibal won't do anything if someone else is here?

He won't kill me if there's someone else to witness it.

Hannibal tilts his head, but his black, soulless eyes never once leave Frederick's face.

'That will be the FBI,' he murmurs. He watches as the muscles bunch under Frederick's jacket. The smaller Alpha scrambles to his feet and tries to bolt for the door, but he is small, weak with fear and clumsy. Hannibal grabs him up, hugging him tight with his broad chest to Chilton's narrow back, a wad of chloroform already locked tight over his face.

Frederick bucks and squirms, but his yells are muffled and nearly silent, and the FBI agents at the door give no indication that they are aware of the struggle.

Hannibal purrs into Frederick's ear, his sharp fang grazing the other Alpha's cheekbone when he grins.

'When you wake up, your only choice will be to run,' he tells him, feeling the heaviness of unconsciousness steal over Frederick's limbs.

The doorbell rings twice; an impatient Agent eager to serve his arrest warrant.

'One moment, please,' Hannibal calls, easing Dr Chilton to the ground.

The world tilts, blurred edges seeping together. Frederick watches, helpless, as Hannibal leaves him to answer the door, and then, before he can even think of calling out, blackness consumes him. His last thought, as a shout and a thump drifts into his cotton-filled ears, is that he should have listened to Will Graham when he had the chance.

***

I haven't been this hungover since I was in college.

Frederick wakes slowly, his head throbbing and mouth dry. His body isn't really his *own* – his limbs are heavy and useless; the muscles slow to respond to his brain.

A knife clatters to the floor, surprising him.

He doesn't remember picking it up.

There's a gun in his lap, and the coppery smell of blood in his nose. His tongue is three times too large for his mouth, and his lips are like sandpaper.

What the hell *happened?*

Groaning, Frederick wipes at the stickiness from his forehead, assuming it must be sweat. When his hand comes away red, he frowns, bleary-eyed and stupid.

Why does my sweat look like blood?

He looks down, retching when he realizes he's splashed with it. Great splotches of crimson, drying to a crusty brown on his shirt and blazer…

Oh my God… Hannibal…

Bits and pieces come back to him, but he can't… It's not…

It's not *possible*. It's a bad dream… It was all just a bad dream, or a sick joke…

Please… It has to be a joke.

A trail of blood leads from his limited edition, hand-stitched teal velvet armchair, and Frederick lurches to his feet, getting his ankles under him and wobbling his way upright, clutching the gun for support.

Hannibal might still be here, after all. He's never shot anyone before, but he feels safer with a weapon in hand.

Being vertical brings its own challenges; Frederick can feel himself swaying as he walks, trying to counteract the roiling, heaving floor as his eyes and ears struggle to understand what he's seeing.

There's so much *blood*, it's hard to know where to look.

Breathing slowly, trying not to taste too much of the metallic salt in the air, Frederick makes his way to the kitchen. As difficult as walking is, his head seems to be clearing with every step, but the fuzziness is fast being replaced by a numb, sweaty sort of dread.

This can't be happening.

But it is. It *is* happening. There's an FBI agent sat on his kitchen worksurface, head lolling and body slack, hands resting, limp, on his thighs…

Guts pooling on his lap and spilling down like sausage links to the marble floor.

I can't vomit. If I vomit, they'll know I was here and they'll think I'm guilty.

It's a stupid thought; a panicked hope that he knows won't make a difference.

Hannibal painted this scene to make him look guilty.

To make *him* the Chesapeake Ripper.

Frederick heaves, swallowing back bile. Turns and his vision swims as he realizes the second Agent is on his breakfast island, impaled with every knife from the kitchen drawers and most of the surgical tools in Gideon's basement room.

There's no stopping the nausea this time. It rises like a tidal wave, too strong to resist, and Frederick vomits his way to his suitcases, gagging and spitting strings of bile as he flees the scene.

He has to get to Will. Will can help him. He'll know what to do.

Please let him know what to do.

***

The sound of crunching snow jerks Will from a fitful doze. He straightens up in his armchair, jerking panicked eyes towards the front door as the dogs begin to bark, and drops his book in his haste to stand.

Please, no more gifts, he thinks, emerging into the sharp, white winter daylight to greet his unwanted visitor.

To his surprise, it is not another courier bearing boxes of candy and gourmet meals – Hannibal had believed his lie that he'd fed the meat to the dogs, and sent another selection of tray dinners, all vegetarian this time.

Will's heart skips a beat and a slow curl of satisfaction warms his stomach when he sees Dr Frederick Chilton, blood-smeared and frightened, on his porch.

It was only a matter of time, really.

Frederick sighs, shivering in the bitter Virginian air, flinching whenever the dogs lick at the red stains on his knuckles. He knows that it is *highly* unorthodox for an Alpha to show up, uninvited, to a bonded Omega's house and request entry, but these are desperate times. And it's *Will.* Of all people, *he* will understand.

'May I use your shower, please?' he whispers, imploring Will with wide, burgundy eyes.

Will takes a breath, wondering if he should say anything. What is there to say, really?

He nods, and whistles the dogs away, allowing Dr Chilton to enter the house before him.

'Upstairs, first door on your right,' he murmurs, bending to retrieve his fallen copy of *A History of Alpha and Omega Bonding Rituals*, which he places with the other library books on his desk. 'I'll wait down here.'

'You should do it, y'know,' Frederick says, nodding towards the cover as he stumbles his way upstairs, leaving a smudge of red on the banister.

'Do what?' Will mutters, frowning at the book.

'Bite him,' Frederick replies, gathering up his tie and shoving it into his hand luggage. 'Bond him in return.' He offers Will a small smile, his eyes tinged with sadness at the Omega's situation. 'It might just save your life.'

***

Dr Chilton's upscale townhouse is an effigy to modern architecture, and currently swarming with FBI Agents. Price approaches Jack as they watch the coroner wheel away the remains of Abel Gideon, and both men shake their heads at such a sorry, brutal sight.

'Gideon hasn't been dead for long,' Price says, falling into step behind him as the Alpha leads the way into the kitchen to find Zeller. 'No more than a couple of hours. Chilton's been carving steaks off him for *days*.'

'Chilton's shelves are filled with a lot of old medical books,' Zeller adds, pulling one such tome down and handing it to Jack, who gazes down at the illustration so perfectly reproduced in the Ripper's tableaus.

'The Wound Man.'

'Mm-hm,' Zeller nods. 'This illustration shows up in a lot of early texts. It's the Ripper's sixth victim.'

Jack shuts the book with a snap, his eyes flashing red.

'Chilton was consulting on the Ripper case when Miriam disappeared. She must've talked to him, made the connection… Beverly made a connection, too.' Pushing past the Betas, he stares, sightless, as he slots all the pieces together into one, perfect, picture. 'Chilton's been a part of the Ripper case since *before* Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Miriam Lass… He had *access* to case files…'

Could it be so obvious? So simple?

'He would know everything the Ripper would need to know,' he finishes, his gut churning with angry confusion.

Could I have been so wrong?

***

By the time Frederick comes down from his shower, he is panicking. Will sits in the same chair where his own life fell apart, right after he'd thrown up Abigail's ear, and watches Chilton spiral into that same abyss. The Alpha scrambles to repack his toiletry bag, ready to flee as he tries to wrap his head around what Hannibal has done to him.

'I have the same… *profile* as Hannibal Lecter!' Frederick spits, zipping up the case, staring at Will when the Omega just watches, silently, from a chair by the wall. 'Same medical and psychological background.' He ducks into the kitchen to grab his sweater, speaking as he pulls it on. 'We are both doctors of note in our field. *Of course it would be me!'*

Will rolls his eyes and looks away in the face of Chilton's theatrics.

'Hannibal was never going to kill me,' Frederick continues, seeking layers of black clothing against the bitter cold of outside. 'I'm his *patsy!* I…' His breath leaves him in a rush and he

sags, his stomach swirling. ‘I have to leave the country,’ he gasps. ‘I *am* leaving the country.’

‘If you run, you look guilty,’ Will reminds him, and Frederick scoffs, tears pricking his eyes.

‘You did not run, and you looked plenty guilty.’ He bundles up his ruined shirt and pushes it down into the gym bag. ‘Abel Gideon was half-*eaten* in my guest room! I have *corpses* on my property!’ The zipper sticks and Chilton abandons it with a snarl, glaring at Will. ‘You just threw up an *ear!’*

‘There’s an APB on you, right now,’ Will says, wondering if he can get past Frederick to reach the caramelized pecans on the kitchen counter. ‘They’ve cancelled credit cards; they’re tracing your *phone*.’

‘I have cash, and I tossed my phone,’ Frederick replies, shrugging into his coat. ‘Jack Crawford thinks I killed two agents – *three* agents… You know what tends to happen to people who do that? Shoot on sight!’

Will nods, blue eyes fixed on the Alpha’s face.

‘I’m gonna *prove* Hannibal Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper,’ he promises, his tone calming Frederick somewhat.

‘I know you will,’ the Alpha replies. ‘And when you do, I will read about it from a secure location, and I will reintroduce myself to society at that… time…’

The barking of Will’s dogs draws his attention, and, as Will looks towards the front door, a dawning sense of horror drains the color from Frederick’s face. He stumbles to the doorway, clinging to the frame for support, his heart beating too hard behind his ribs.

‘Will…’ Staring down at the too-calm Omega, a shiver runs down Frederick’s spine, and he sees, for just a moment, an echo of the same soulless consideration he’d noticed on Hannibal’s face. ‘… what have you done?’

‘I called Jack Crawford,’ Will says, meeting his gaze steadily.

‘No…’ Frederick screws up his face, fresh tears springing to his eyes. ‘N… *No!’* He fumbles to pull the gun from his pocket, aiming it at the Omega’s placid face. ‘No! No!’

Will sighs, and pushes himself up, even as Frederick whines and waggles the gun at him.

‘No! No! No! No, st-stay there!’

Will huffs, and shakes his head, his lips curving into a cold smirk.

‘You’re not a *killer*, Frederick,’ he murmurs, turning his back on the Alpha and leaving to get the door.

Jack Crawford slips and slides his way over the compacted snow to Will’s porch. The Omega steps outside, wearing dark jeans and a flannel shirt over his top, his boots more suited to the snowy terrain.

Will's eyes flash gold, and his heart surges at the sight of the Alpha. *Only* the Alpha.

'Why'd you come alone, Jack?' he calls, already knowing the answer that Jack won't speak.

'Where is he?'

'Why'd you come alone?'

'WHERE IS HE?' Jack bellows, eyes lit up a furious red as he mounts the porch steps. Will jumps in front of him, a hand on the Alpha's chest.

'Hey, I *told* you; everything is *not* what it seems.' He smiles into Jack's glaring face, dipping his head a fraction to bare his throat in classic Omegan appeasement. 'The Chesapeake Ripper is still playing with us. *All* of us.'

'The Chesapeake Ripper is not playing all of us, Will.' Jack shakes his head in disgust, stabbing a finger at the Omega's collarbone. 'He's playing *you*.'

He makes to shove past Will, but the smaller man grabs him again, keeping him from entering the house.

'Jack, wait,' Will says, stroking Jack's arms to calm him. 'I'll bring him out. He's got a gun.'

Jack pauses, just long enough for Will to step away and reach for the door, and then he's striding forwards, stinking of rut.

'Good, he growls, disappearing inside, his own weapon at the ready.

Fuck, Hannibal… Will rolls his eyes, sliding his hands into the pockets of his jeans as he leans against the porch column. *You must be just loving this.*

Jack searches the house quickly but thoroughly, following the sharp, acrid tang of Chilton's fear. It hovers thickest near the kitchen, and then abruptly thins near the steps to the washroom off the back porch.

He's fled the house.

With a low growl, Jack gives chase. He's not hunted another Alpha like this in years, and there's a deep, primal satisfaction in knowing he's going to run his prey down.

Frederick staggers through the snowdrifts, branches whipping his face raw. Every breath burns in his frozen lungs, and his heart can't race fast enough as he pushes his aching, exhausted body faster.

'CHILTON!'

Jack's roar sends birds flying, and Frederick lets out a strangled howl as he falls, gathers his legs under him and follows the path of a half-frozen stream through the woods. He can hear the other Alpha behind him, bounding over fallen logs, his healthy body giving him unmatched grace and speed.

Frederick hits an open space and throws himself forward into a searing sprint, his calf muscles cramping and bringing tears to his eyes.

Skidding to a stop, Jack watches the other Alpha trying to escape. He has to give him a chance to surrender before he can shoot.

‘Chilton, stop where you are!’ he shouts, taking aim when the other man shows no signs of stopping.

A shot rings out and Frederick throws himself down a slope, realizing as he lands in it that he’s in the stream. The water burns his skin with the cold, and soaking through his trousers and filling his boots, numbing his fingers, and toes, and everything in between.

He scrambles forwards but he can’t find surface on the slippery ground, and his legs windmill as he tries to drag himself up the other side of the riverbank.

Above him, across the gap, Jack Crawford takes aim again, firing another warning shot at the ground above his head. Chilton whimpers, covering his eyes as snow and bits of bark fly everywhere, and then skids down to turn and face his victor.

Jack stares, wild-eyed and panting, as Chilton raises his hands above his head in surrender. His finger twitches on the trigger, his hand *aches* to pull it, but he can’t… He *can’t*…

Frederick whines, a submissive call for mercy, and sniffs at the snow melting with the tears on his face.

‘Please,’ he whispers, imploring Jack, but for *what*, Jack isn’t quite sure. To spare his life, or end it, because he knows what’s coming next…?

‘Frederick Chilton,’ he calls, reaching into his coat pocket for his handcuffs. ‘You’re under arrest for murder.’

***

Frederick’s processing is a twisted parody of Will’s. Where the Omega was humble, the Alpha is lavish. Where Will was afraid of his own complicity, Frederick is dully resigned to the fact that he is being framed for crimes of which he is entirely innocent.

His greatest worry now is the shame of it.

‘One navy-blue sweater,’ Price calls, inspecting the items that Chilton was arrested in. ‘One pair of men’s dress pants in charcoal gray… One black and red pea coat…’

As he talks for the camera, Zeller collects scrapings from beneath Frederick’s nails.

‘One black leather billfold, containing $443… Various credit cards… One set of car keys…’

Frederick sways, nausea battling dizziness as the reality of his situation fights the numbing shock.

‘I need to speak to Will Graham,’ he whispers, cerise eyes flicking to Zeller’s hard face. The Beta scowls at him, dark brows drawn low, and he stabs the scraper a little harder than necessary into the Alpha’s skin.

‘I don’t care *what* you need.’

‘One Montblanc fountain pen, in silver and black,’ Price says, reminding them of the camera, and their purpose.

The sooner they get him processed, the sooner they get him out of their sight.

Once Frederick has been strip-searched and dressed in an orange jumpsuit, he is led by two FBI agents to the interrogation room and shacked to the metal table. The cuffs chafe the skin of his wrists, and he wonders how Will bore the treatment so stoically. To have so much hate directed at oneself… And Omegas are by far the more sensitive of the castes…

He groans, and rolls his burgundy eyes across the width of the table.

‘Does it have to be *you?’* A scoff, quickly swallowed by the silence of the room. ‘Seems like one final indignity.’

Alana Bloom regards Frederick with open distaste, her eyes blazing, lips pursed and cheeks pale but for the twin spots of color high on the cheekbones.

She *despises* him for what he’s done, in her mind, to Hannibal and, by association, Will. As far as she is concerned, he is the reason that Will tried to kill Hannibal. The reason her lover bears such horrific scars on his arms, and has faced unreasonable scrutiny from Jack Crawford.

Frederick can see it all, churning behind the blue fire of her glare.

‘Not like *you* to hide an achievement,’ she sneers, and the *animosity* makes Frederick wince. He finds himself very, very tired by the day’s events.

‘The achievement is *not* mine,’ he replies, his voice weak.

‘Whose is it?’ Alana asks, raising an eyebrow. ‘Hannibal Lecter’s?’

‘Those are just words coming out of your mouth,’ Frederick sighs, shaking his head in dismay. ‘No weight to them… No consideration they may be true.’

‘They’re *not* true!’ Alana hisses, sitting forwards and baring her teeth at Chilton. ‘You were using coercive therapies; influencing Abel Gideon and Will Graham to point the Ripper investigations in false directions!’

‘You cannot see it,’ Frederick mumbles, blinking dully at the *devotion* on Alana’s face. How painful that must be for poor Will, to have another fawn so openly over his mate. ‘And you will not see it until it is too late…’ He shakes his head. ‘Don’t say I did not warn you, Dr Bloom.’

Frederick swallows, realizing how precarious his situation is. How every word he speaks is being recorded and monitored…

‘In fact,’ he adds, glancing at the two-way mirror behind the Beta woman. ‘I believe these should be my last words on the subject of the Ripper, until my lawyer arrives.’

In the booth behind the mirror, Miriam’s scent spikes and her heart begins to race. Terror swarms her, catching her like a rip-tide and dragging her under, into the darkness and all its waiting madness.

You’re waking now… Waking… Calm… Waking in a quiet room…

The man before her, once hidden in shadow and light, the Alpha she so desperately fears, is none other than Frederick Chilton…

He braced her. He stole her, amputated her arm, drugged her and kept her in prodrome until she was nearly mad from heat hormones…

Tears pour from her golden eyes, and she can’t stop the whimpers bubbling up from her stuttering chest.

You’re waking, now. Waking in a quiet room… Safe…

She’ll never be safe again. Not whilst the Ripper is alive.

‘It’s *him*,’ she gasps, shuddering as her muscles seize up and lock her in place. ‘It’s *him! It’s him!* It’s… It’s…’

‘Come here,’ Jack murmurs, pulling her closer to soothe her, purring low in an effort to ground her. ‘It’s alright.’

But Miriam, panting for breath her lungs are too small to take in, grabs his gun and, in a moment of pure panic, fires at the shackled Alpha.

The bullet shatters the glass, carving through the air to whizz past Alana’s hair, close enough that she feels the buzz like an insect against her eardrum. She throws herself to the floor, landing hard enough to knock the breath from her lungs, and the bullet finishes its trajectory by piercing Dr Chilton’s right cheek and exiting out the back of his skull.

As she stares at what she’s done, Miriam hears Dr Lecter’s words echo in her mind, like a healing balm over the wounds suffered since her capture.

The most important aspect to a successful recovery is recognizing that life will never be the same.

Life will never be the same for her, again. She knows this.

But, at least now, it will never be the same for Dr Chilton, either.

***

At half past seven that Thursday evening, Hannibal indulges himself in a large glass of Malbec as he waits in his office, the low, soothing notes of Bach's cello suite playing in the background, a fire crackling in the hearth and satisfaction coiled in his gut.

He had heard the news about Miriam shooting Frederick from Jack; the head of the BSU rang him shortly after the incident, curt to the point of rudeness, explaining the situation and that he would not require Hannibal to come back in for further questioning as the FBI was closing the case on the Chesapeake Ripper.

He had almost sounded *disappointed*.

Smiling to himself, Hannibal lifts the glass to take a congratulatory sip, but a quiet knock on the door interrupts him.

There's only one person he wants that to be.

Setting the glass down, Hannibal crosses the room in a dozen easy strides to open the door to his waiting area, flushing suddenly beneath the thick cashmere of his sweater when he sees his guest.

Will turns at the sound of the handle, his coat draped over his arm, wearing a thick red shirt and loose slacks. He visited the barbers earlier today, and cut both his hair and his beard, trimming it back into shape after his incarceration. As much as he hadn't wanted to admit it to himself at the time, the moment he sees his Alpha, with his silky hair, trim body and regal face, Will *knows* that he'd wanted to look good for him.

Hannibal's chest swells, and he can barely keep his purr down as his eyes warm to maroon at the sight of his mate. Will looks *good*; poised and elegant despite his cheap clothes. Memory of their last time together surges to the forefront of his mind, equal parts apprehension and arousal, and Hannibal can *smell* his scent thickening in the air between them.

'Hello, Will.'

How I have missed you, mylimasis.

Will regards the other man coolly, ignoring the fluttering in his belly as Hannibal's rich musk settles like sugar on his tongue.

'May I come in?' he asks, lacing his tone with just enough challenge to keep things interesting. To remind Hannibal that he hasn't forgotten, or forgiven, his actions.

Hannibal considers him, holding the door open but barring entry, eyes darting down to the coat in Will's arms.

'Do you intend to point a gun at me?' he asks, earning a teasing smile from Will, who dips his head a fraction to entice him with a glimpse of his throat as he draws closer.

They both know Hannibal cannot refuse him entry. Hannibal cannot refuse him anything.

'Not tonight,' Will murmurs, walking into the office as his Alpha steps aside for him.

Hannibal takes a slow, deep breath, savoring Will's honey and smoke scent, his mouth watering at the idea of tasting him. He watches as Will considers the armchairs, set in their usual place, and the glass of wine on the desk.

There's no notebook. No sketches. Hannibal has been waiting. For him.

'Are you expecting someone?' Will asks, deliberately obtuse even as he looks around the room, cataloguing all the fine details of the place where he so thoroughly lost his mind.

How many times has Hannibal fucked me in this office? I can't even remember them all…

'Only you,' Hannibal says, closing the door and turning to watch Will part the air with his presence. His mate is so much stronger, now. His shoulders are squared, his back straight. He moves with purpose and grace.

It's magnificent.

'You kept my standing appointment open?' Will's heart skips a beat at the idea of it, the visual of Hannibal thinking of him, every week, for the last six weeks. He stares up at the mezzanine library, at the rows and rows of medical and psychology books that his Alpha has read…

All that knowledge, and you're still such a child. So stupid when it comes to human emotions. Your own and mine.

Hannibal makes a show of checking his watch, even though he knows exactly what it will say.

'And you are right on time,' he preens.

Will sighs, blinking back tears. This is harder than he'd thought it would be, but he can't back down now.

He won't.

One of us has to be the adult in this relationship.

'I have to deal with you,' he murmurs, his back still to Hannibal, his gaze still raised so as not to spill tears. 'And my… feelings about you.' A sharp swallow and a blink, repressing the prickle of gold irises. 'I think it's best if I do that directly.'

Hannibal regards Will quietly, sensing a change in their dynamic and wondering at its cause. Is it Will's pregnancy, or simply his mate's darkness, come to the surface through his ministrations?

'First, you have to grieve for what is lost and what has changed,' he says, approaching the Omega at an angle, lest he startle Will.

Will hums, turning towards him.

‘I’ve changed,’ he replies, his voice low but thrumming with anger and sorrow. ‘You *changed* me.’

Hannibal feels the words like a rebuke, and is surprised when it stings.

‘The relationship that we had is over,’ he says, suppressing the flare of worry that Will might say everything is over. That he wants to leave. Break the bond and sever his connection to Hannibal forever. ‘The Chesapeake Ripper is over,’ he offers.

An appeasement, to his wrathful god.

Will’s lips curl into a cold, knowing smile. He stares across Hannibal’s desk, looking into the fire without really seeing the flames, his skin humming in Hannibal’s presence. Even after everything, he craves the warmth of his Alpha’s skin. The strength of his arms around him.

‘It *had* to be Miriam, didn’t it?’ he whispers. ‘She was… *compelled* to take his life, so she could take her own back.’

My clever boy…

Hannibal allows himself to drink in Will’s profile; his close-cut curls, sharp jaw and eyes snapping blue fire, ringed with the dull gold of a mated Omega… His lean body and slender hands…

Dangerous hands. Devoted hands.

‘How will *you* take your life back?’ he asks, earning himself a raised eyebrow from Will and the sight of his mate turning to face him fully, head tilted in mocking consideration, jaw lifted just enough to be a flirtatious challenge.

‘I’d like to resume my therapy,’ Will purrs, noting with satisfaction the flicker of surprise on Hannibal’s face. The *hope* turning to pleasure.

He drapes his coat over the back of his armchair and takes his seat, arms resting on the sides, legs spread, body open.

He’s not afraid of Hannibal. Not anymore.

You’re my monster. And I’m yours.

Barely able to keep himself from grinning, Hannibal looks from the desk to his armchair and then down, gulping back another rattling purr. His insides heave and twist with excitement, his mind afire with the possibilities.

How long I’ve waited for this, beloved…

Taking a deep, silent breath, he eases himself into his own chair, hands clasped in his lap, one leg crossed over the other.

The picture of calm control.

He offers Will a tiny smile, his eyes sparkling, gazing at the pale and furious face of his mate. Will's rage boils just beneath the surface, waiting to explode in violence, and tension crackles like lightning between them, heavy with possibility.

With potential.

'Where shall we begin?' he asks, tossing a line out into the water to see what Will might do.

Will swallows, rubbing his tingling fingertips together, piercing Hannibal with his gaze.

'I've given it a lot of thought,' he says, his soft voice at odds with his scowl. 'I thought I might start with how you manipulated my hormones… poisoned me with estrogen until my brain was inflamed and I had *seizures*… Or maybe when you killed Abigail, and force-fed me her *ear*…' He huffs, grinding his teeth and shaking his head. Looks down, gathering his breath, and then locks eyes with Hannibal again. 'But, actually, I want to start with you *fucking* Alana.'

Shocked silence greets his statement, but Will's satisfaction is fleeting. He can feel his emotions getting the better of him, rising like a tsunami within him, battering away his self-control, and he grips the armrest until the leather creaks, allowing a single tear to roll down his cheek.

'Why'd you do it, Hannibal?' he asks, trembling as he stares at his Alpha. 'It wasn't enough to lock me up; you had to cheat on me as well?'

Hannibal's heart squeezes painfully tight at the sight of Will's grief. The regret he'd felt is *nothing* compared to this sick, sinking feeling. This self-disgust. He can feel Will's pain through the bond, but it is horrifically tinged with self-doubt.

As though Will thinks he has done something to *deserve* being treated in such a way…

'Did Alana tell you?' he asks, surprised by how rough his voice sounds. By his own hot eyes and constricted throat.

Oh, my God…

Will sways, closing his eyes as he swallows bile at Hannibal's admission. He'd known, of course he'd known, but to *hear* it, to have it *confirmed*...

'I'm such an idiot,' he whispers, turning his face away so that he doesn't have to look at his Alpha. So that he won't be tempted to take a knife to that lying mouth, or carve out his unfaithful eyes… His deceiving tongue…

'How many times?' he mutters, feeling his pulse thundering in his exposed throat.

'Twice,' Hannibal replies, equally hushed. Will's sorrow is etched into every line of his face, tilting his dark brows down and twisting his lips into a grimace, and Hannibal finds himself aching to soothe it, rather than reveling in the beauty of it, as he'd expected to.

It is an altogether disconcerting feeling.

What are you doing to me, you cunning boy?

‘Twice…’ Will nods, gritting his teeth against the scream hovering under his jaw. ‘*Twice…*’

‘I –’

‘Did you use protection?’ Will asks, glaring at Hannibal again. ‘Both times? You were safe?’

‘Of course,’ Hannibal replies, somewhat offended by the suggestion of endangering Will, their *child*, or of creating another with Alana. He sits forwards, resting his elbows on his knees, eyes flashing crimson when Will flinches back away from him, recoiling as far as the chair will allow him.

‘”Of course”,’ Will echoes weakly, shaking his head. ‘*Eugh… ’* He shudders and scrubs at his face, his skin crawling. When he speaks again, he fixes his eyes on Hannibal’s chest, unable to look into those soulless eyes. ‘What purpose did it serve? Was it just an alibi, so you could throw Jack off your scent, or is it something more?’

‘In my life, I have only loved one person –’ Hannibal begins, but Will gives him such a vicious look that he falls silent.

‘*No*,’ the Omega growls, his eyes blazing furious gold. ‘You don’t get to *say* that, *Dr Lecter*. Answer the *question*. Was it an alibi, or something else?’

‘It was a punishment,’ Hannibal admits, earning himself a scathingly raised eyebrow. ‘For the nurse.’

‘You’re such a *child*,’ Will breathes, staring at him in disgust. ‘I hurt you, so you hurt me?’

‘Quid pro quo,’ Hannibal replies coldly, resuming his original position, crossing his legs to defend himself from Will’s ire. ‘You took another Alpha’s seed into your body, Will.’

‘I did what I *had* to do!’ Will snarls. He cuts off, jaw working furiously, and clenches his hands into white-knuckled fists. ‘You had me *incarcerated*. It didn’t leave me many *options*.’

‘I have only ever tried to help you realize the truth of your potential,’ Hannibal counters, tilting his head to encourage his mate to look at him again. To engage properly in their conversation.

‘And what truth have *you* learned?’ Will snaps, frowning at him. ‘Have I reached my *potential?’*

A slow, predatory smile curves Hannibal’s lips, and an unnervingly pleasant heat settles on the nape of Will’s neck at the sight of it. He shifts, aware of how strong and smoky his scent has become, drawn like a moth to the flames of Hannibal’s gaze.

‘You are so much more than you were,’ the Alpha purrs, adoration softening his features. ‘Even in the face of such adversity, you remained true to yourself. You sent a man to his death, and manipulated those around you to create agency in the world.’

Hannibal's words slither beneath his skin, settling deep into his bones and pulsing black tar with every heartbeat.

Will is silent for a while, considering the truth of it, and then he sighs.

'I don't want to be this angry with you,' he says, softer than he'd meant it to be. 'When I asked Matthew to kill you, and I felt the crest start to tear…' He watches as Hannibal unconsciously touches his right finger to his left wrist, rubbing the deepest wound. 'It wasn't right. It *isn't* right.'

I want to kill you myself.

Hannibal pauses, tasting the wildfire smell of Will's aggression. Oh, but his mate is dangerous… He is learning to control his power.

'Do you want to hurt me, Will?' he asks, rewarded with a sharp intake of breath from the other man. Hannibal hums, smirking at the realization, and brushes a crease from his dress pants. 'It's only natural.'

'Especially given my *nature*,' Will retorts, his eyes flickering between gold and blue. He settles back into his seat, taking several deep breaths to calm himself.

'We need some ground rules,' he says, looking at Hannibal again. 'I'm not a *toy* for your amusement. I'm not your victim. I'm your equal. Your partner.'

'What do you suggest?' Hannibal replies, surprising Will by his easy acquiescence.

'No more dispensing my medication,' Will says. 'If I want to take heat suppressants in the future, I will. It's *not* for you to say.' When Hannibal opens his mouth to speak, Will holds up a hand. 'If you have concerns, you will *discuss* them with me, like a respectful *adult*.' He gives Hannibal a sardonic smile, barely more than a twist of his lips. 'Anything else would just be *rude*.'

Hannibal smiles, and relents with a disgruntled huff.

'Very well,' he replies. 'But I must insist you remain off the suppressants for the time being. It would not be safe.'

It would poison the baby.

'I plan on experiencing my next heat naturally, anyway,' Will replies, eyeing his nails. 'And my cover at the FBI has been blown, so there's no point covering my scent.'

He ignores Hannibal's gleeful expression, listening to the dull crackle of the fire as the silence pools between them.

'No more gifts,' he continues, the words flowing even as he thinks them. 'I can take care of myself.'

'A simple gesture of friendship,' Hannibal replies. 'Do you prefer the new meals?'

‘My dogs did,’ Will lies, smirking at the flash of indignation and hurt on Hannibal’s face. His sneer gives way to a more genuine smile, though, and the Alpha’s eyes widen as he realizes he’s been duped.

‘You haven’t thrown them away,’ Hannibal says, something akin to wonder in his voice. ‘You like them?’

‘I like the *meals*,’ Will says, frowning at him. At his joy. ‘I don’t like what they represent.’

‘Would you prefer I cook for you?’ Hannibal offers, watching his mate wince at the idea of it.

‘*No*,’ Will growls. ‘I told you; I can take care of myself. *Especially* when I’m not being thrown into prodrome every few days.’

‘You needed to come off your suppressants, Will.’ Hannibal’s tone is sharp; in this, he will brook no argument. ‘Sustained use is dangerous.’

‘So is mating to a murderer,’ Will mutters, rolling his eyes at his own stupidity, horrified by how close to tears he feels.

He blows out his breath and seeks the safety of the mezzanine balustrade, watching the soft light play across the polished wood, his mind whirring with a thousand panicked thoughts, each one slipping away before he can understand them.

‘Will…’

At Hannibal’s soft voice, Will grinds the heels of his palms into his eye sockets until colors explode across the lids, brutally rubbing away his show of weakness.

‘God… This was a bad idea,’ he mutters, rising and rubbing his hands on his pants. ‘I can’t *do* this right now. I can’t. I thought I could, but I have to go.’

Hannibal stands with him, pain sparking his eyes red when Will shies away from potential contact. He drops his arm and nods, stepping aside when Will reaches for his coat and hurries to the door.

‘Will,’ he calls, pleased when his Omega at least pauses with his shaking hand on the brass handle. ‘Trust that I am here; whenever you *are* ready.’

‘I know.’ Will gulps, throwing a wobbly smile over his shoulder. ‘That’s part of the *problem*, Hannibal.’

Su-zakana

Chapter Summary

Will requests that Hannibal begin Courting him, to see if he wants to continue his bond with him. Meanwhile, he agrees to resume helping the FBI, consulting on cases as a Special Informant, and Jack calls him in on an unusual case at a local yard, where a woman has been found inside the womb of a dead horse, with a live bird placed inside her chest.

Hannibal begins therapy with a new patient.

Chapter Notes

IT'S FINALLY HERE, PEEPS!

I am SO sorry for the massive delay. It's been a super busy few weeks, and I've been poorly at the same time. :-(

Back on track now, though, and hoping to crack on at roughly a chapter per 10-14 days again as before. Wish me luck! xxx

EIGHT

Su-zakana

Fishing has always been his safe place. A place to think. To plan.

The weekend dawns, bright and cold, and the temperature drops to sub-zero, blanketing the woods and fields of Virginia in thick, glittering snow. Even the creek near his farmhouse freezes over, prompting Will to invite his former boss out for a spot of Saturday morning ice fishing.

He spent all of Thursday’s sleepless night, and most of yesterday, working out a plan. Now, he wants to share it with Jack Crawford.

Twin tracks are the only things to mar the perfect expanse of white, leading to a narrow hole and two upturned crates, where the shivering, fidgeting Alpha, and focused, busy Omega have been sitting for the past hour.

‘I get it,’ Jack says, breaking the silence between them. He sniffs against the bitter air, and sighs a cloud against the stark white of the sky, his fingers numb around the handle of his fishing rod, even inside thermal leather gloves. ‘The great outdoors.’

He huffs a laugh, looking around at the vast *openness* of the space that Will calls home, trying to avoid watching him bait the hook on the ends of his line. He’s not squeamish, not by a long shot, but it’s still *wriggling*.

There’s no one around for hundreds of miles. No one to bother them or interfere. Nothing to focus on but the cold and the feel of snow-covered ice beneath their feet.

‘I get the attraction,’ he continues, slanting a side-eyed frown at the smaller man, even as a shiver makes his balls jump up against his body. ‘*In summer*.’

Will barks a laugh, prompting a chuckle from Jack at the acknowledgement of his insanity.

‘Well, it’s a lot harder to catch trout when the water’s really cold,’ Will replies, earning himself a quirked eyebrow.

‘That’s another argument for *summer*, Will.’

‘Maybe,’ Will agrees, grinning without looking up. Jack gives a playful growl, huddling down into his thick overcoat.

‘Trout are supposed to be hunters!’ he complains, scowling at his rod. ‘They should be chewing on my hook, here!’

‘Yeah, when it’s cold their metabolisms drop and they’re not as hungry,’ Will explains, still fiddling with the hook. His thick gloves aren’t helping his dexterity, and his arms are stiff inside two sweaters and an insulated jacket. He’s wearing his favorite woolen hat, pulled low to protect the delicate tips of his ears now that his shaggy curls have been lopped off.

‘Yeah…’ Jack snorts. ‘So how *do* you catch a fish that isn’t hungry?’ he asks, and, now, they both know they’re not just talking about trout anymore.

‘You change your tactics,’ Will says, dropping his line into the water. ‘You use *live* bait that moves… *excites* them to action. You, er, you gotta make him bite…’ His eyes flash gold and he sets his jaw. ‘Even though he’s not hungry.’

Jack grins, his own eyes flickering crimson as the thrill of the hunt coils within him.

‘You make him act on *instinct*. He’s always a predator.’

Holding his rod handle between his knees, Will reaches into his jacket pocket for the little flask of whisky he always takes with him. There’s nothing like a warming shot when you’re thigh-deep in water, or slowly losing the feeling in your toes and balls.

‘You have to create a *reality* where only you and the fish exist,’ he says, causing Jack to roll his eyes and look away. ‘Your lure is the one thing he *wants*,’ Will continues, lifting the flask to his lips with a shrug. ‘Despite *everything* he knows.’

‘Make a wrong move, he swims away?’ Jack asks, reaching for the alcohol. Will grimaces at the burn in his throat and hands it over.

‘Yeah.’ He ducks his head and purrs, low and melodic. A uniquely Omegan sound. ‘I’m a good fisherman, Jack.’

Jack raises the flask in toast, hunger flaring deep in his burgundy gaze.

‘You hook him… I’ll land him.’

***

Does this mean he’s ready?

Hannibal sharpens his blade to a razor’s edge, gutting the three trout caught this morning by his Omega, and bakes them in steam to ensure a succulent dish for the evening. He would have preferred to dine with Will alone, but appearances must be maintained, now more than ever, and his mate is still skittish about being alone with him, requesting that Jack join them.

Smiling to himself at the simple joy of having Will at his dinner table once again, Hannibal adds the finishing touches to his display and carries it through to the dining room.

‘Truite saumonée au bleu,’ he announces, setting the silver platter down between Jack and his own setting at the head of the table. ‘With vegetables and broth, served with a hollandaise sauce on the side.’

He serves Jack, first, noting the tension running through Will’s slight frame, and the anger burning in his eyes, half-hidden behind the ugly glasses he’s resumed wearing. A barrier between them; one that stings Hannibal in a deep part of him he hadn’t realized could still feel.

‘Beautiful fish, Will,’ he says, trying to coax a smile from his trembling mate. Instead, Will frowns at him, doing nothing to hide his lingering contempt.

‘It was my turn to provide the *meat*,’ he replies, earning himself a warning glare from Jack. Hannibal, however, studiously ignores the barb, and brings the platter around to serve him, second.

Of course an Alpha guest would take priority, Will thinks, refusing to look at the other man, even though Hannibal’s presence is soothing, and all he wants to do is curl up against his warm, broad chest. He squashes down his rising nausea, disturbed to find himself still queasy at the smell of his favorite food, and clenches his hands into clammy fists on his thighs.

‘More flavorful and firm than farmed specimens,’ Hannibal says, continuing in the same tone as before, as though his Omega *hadn’t* just accused him of cannibalism. He scoops another serving from the platter and places it into Will’s bowl. ‘I find the trout to be a very Nietzschean fish.’

And I find you to be, on occasion, a smug prick, Will thinks, glowering at his bowl and wondering how Hannibal might react to him vomiting all over the table.

‘Trials of his wild existence find their way into the flavor of the flesh,’ Hannibal adds, pouring a little of the broth over the fish, which, of course, has been designed to give the appearance of it *eating itself*.

How very apt.

Jack nods his approval at Hannibal foregoing social convention in favor of caring for his mate and completing Will’s dish first, but Will doesn’t move; just clamps his lips shut and looks sullen.

‘I hope that “providing the meat” doesn’t mean you still harbor doubts about what I serve at my table,’ Hannibal says, and Jack smiles to soothe his fellow Alpha, even as Will unfolds his napkin and lays it over his lap instead of answering.

‘No doubts, Dr Lecter,’ Jack promises, inhaling deeply as the aromatic steam from the broth rises from his bowl. ‘Only the, er… *wounds* we dealt each other, until we got to the truth.’

‘Which is why we *need* to move past apologies and forgiveness,’ Hannibal says firmly. Will looks very pale, and there is a thin sheen of sweat on his brow. Is it the pregnancy, or nerves after their last conversation? He serves his own portion and unbuttons his suit jacket as he sits, careful not to crease the expensive fabric as he adds, ‘Chilton has *many* victims besides the dead.’ Picks up his fork and spoon, ready to eat, and glances once more at his mate. ‘We will absorb this experience; it will change us…’

I’ve changed… You changed me…

Will’s words echo in his mind, and Hannibal finds himself forcing his smile at Jack.

‘Well, we are all Nietzschean fish in that regard.’

‘Makes us tastier,’ Will mutters, stabbing at the fish and wishing he could spear Hannibal, instead; he knows his Alpha wants nothing more than to taste him again, in whatever way he can. Jack, too, though most likely seasoned and roasted in garlic oil.

Hannibal grins, certain they’re thinking along the same lines, thoroughly enjoying the spark of defiance in those gorgeous, stormy blue eyes of his. Jack, however, does not seem amused by Will’s sharp remark, and glares at his former employee.

‘None of our actions were personal,’ he says, clearly working his hardest to draw a line in the sand.

Will lifts his glass of wine, surprised to find he’s really enjoying the light, fruity taste.

‘Well, I tried to have Hannibal *killed* so I could break my bond with him… Isn’t that personal?’ he replies.

Oh, my darling boy…

Hannibal can barely keep from purring at the display; Will’s resolute refusal to play along with Jack is glorious.

‘You thought I was a killer,’ he reasons, smiling benevolently as Will drinks his alcohol-free wine. ‘The greatest crime now would be to walk away from what we’ve shared, and suffered.’

Our relationship is worth it, Will. I promise you. Don’t give up on us.

‘In many ways, we need each other.’ He glances at Jack, ignoring the tightness in his throat at the *truth* of that statement. He *needs* Will. More than air. More than *life*. ‘We are the only ones who will know what this feels like.’

Fed up of Hannibal twisting his words, as slippery as the fucking fish in his bowl, Will replaces the wine for a forkful of trout –

And immediately regrets it. Sickness wells, hot and bright, and he forces a shaky chew, his mouth flooding with too-wet spit. He wedges the fish between his back teeth, trying not to taste it as he forces out a rough compliment.

‘This fish is delicious.’

Hannibal preens, his eyes glowing maroon as he brings his glass of Sauvignon Blanc to his mouth.

‘Isn’t it?’ he agrees, taking a slow, smug sip.

The fish… Our future together, now that you’re coming around… It’s all delicious.

He’s going to be sick.

Will sets his knife and fork down very carefully, unable to bring himself to swallow. He sees Hannibal and Jack take a bite, Jack groaning his satisfaction, and it’s too much. His stomach gives an unpleasant lurch, and he knows he needs to leave the table *right now*.

‘’S’cuse me,’ he manages, clapping a hand over his mouth and hurrying from the room. He breaks into a run when he reaches the foyer, and bursts into the guest bathroom beside the cloakroom, falling to his knees by the basin and heaving. The fish is followed by the citrus salad starter he’d demolished, and then the sweet and sour pork ready meal he’d had for lunch, and Will rests his sweaty forehead on the seat between bouts of nausea, screwing his eyes tight shut and kicking himself for being so stupid as to bring *fish* to dinner again. He’s not been able to tolerate it since his release, and now, mate or not, Hannibal might just kill him for how rude he’s been.

A soft knock on the door makes him wince, and Will flushes the toilet, rising to rinse his mouth and hands before opening it.

Hannibal doesn’t say anything, just pulls him into a hug and offers him his handkerchief, steering Will from the bathroom and shutting the door on the smell. He gives his Omega’s neck a squeeze, glad to feel Will soften against him, and, after a moment, smooths Will’s hair back from his forehead to check his temperature.

‘Let me make you an omelet,’ he suggests, rubbing circles into the small of Will’s back. His mate sighs softly, submitting to the touch, and then pulls away with what appears to be sheer force of will.

‘I think I might be coming down with something,’ Will mumbles, scratching at his jaw. Slants a cruel look up at Hannibal, his mouth twisting in distaste. ‘Unless I just can’t stomach the idea of eating anything cooked by you.’

Choosing to ignore the barb, Hannibal simply steers Will back towards the dining room, whisking away the offending fish, broth and hollandaise sauce, and thoughtfully moving a flower arrangement and platter of freshly cut pomegranates to shield him from the sight of Jack tucking into his trout.

‘I’ll just be a moment,’ he says, inclining his head to the fellow Alpha, who waves him away with a genial smile and a glug of wine.

When they’re alone, however, Jack’s eyes flash red.

‘What the *hell*, Will?’ he hisses, leaning forwards over his dish to pierce the Omega with a glare. ‘You’re supposed to be *reconciling*, not insulting him at the table!’

‘Believe me, it wasn’t intentional,’ Will mutters, concentrating on the smell of fruit instead of fish. He fiddles with his cutlery, trying to ignore the nagging worry in the back of his mind, absently rubbing at his stomach as he waits for it to settle.

When it becomes clear that Will isn’t going to elaborate further, Jack relents with an angry huff and makes a point of eating another mouthful of trout. He keeps a close eye on Will, however, only relaxing again when Hannibal returns with a fluffy omelet for his mate.

‘Here you go, Will,’ Hannibal says, resisting the urge to squeeze Will’s shoulder when he sets the plate down before him. Will offers him a small, twisted smile of thanks and tucks in, leaving Jack to fill the silence with conversation.

The Alpha seems only too happy to oblige, alternating mouthfuls of fish with questions about psychology, forcing Will to endure Hannibal’s history lesson on the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, who he already knows about from his degree, but who Jack has barely heard of.

He refuses to acknowledge the fact that Hannibal is highly engaging and enigmatic when sharing his impressively detailed repertoire of facts, and that he actually learns several new things himself, and spends a good part of the meal glaring at a stupid little bird skull placed between the carved pomegranates in front of him, devouring his eggs in a matter of minutes.

Dessert is, thankfully, a silky panna cotta with fresh berries and a sharp fruit compote, which has Will salivating at the mere sight of it. Seized by a childish urge, and given courage from the three glasses of wine he’s ingested, he leans over to steal a spoonful of Hannibal’s pudding after demolishing his own, smirking at his Alpha’s slack-jawed surprise.

‘If you were anyone else, Will…’ Hannibal growls, but his tone is playful and he smiles as he offers his plate again, resigning himself to just the fruit as his mate takes another helping, and

another, until the dessert is gone.

‘Will doesn’t have the same sense of *respect* as other people,’ Jack says, half-frowning at the man across from him.

‘You mean the same respect as other *Omegas*,’ Will retorts, speaking around his fourth glass of wine. His dark shadow lingers just beneath the surface, and he is only too happy to verbally spar with the two Alphas across from him, especially if it means he can insult Hannibal, who, of course, decides to deny him such enjoyment.

‘I, for one, appreciate Will’s forthright nature,’ he says, rising to top up both his and Jack’s drinks. ‘Will? More wine?’

‘I think I’d prefer a whiskey,’ Will replies, testing a theory. He pushes back from the table and gathers up his plate, bowl and cutlery. ‘You serve; I’ll tidy up.’

‘You sound like a married couple already,’ Jack teases, earning himself a death glare from the Omega at the offensively naïve joke, even as Hannibal breaks into a wide smile.

‘Perhaps one day,’ Hannibal murmurs, his eyes glinting when the other man growls a warning.

‘You’d be a terrible housewife,’ Will snaps, elbowing Hannibal side to get to his table setting.

‘Housewife? You would keep me at home, caged in domesticity?’ Hannibal asks, slanting a glance at Will from the corner of his eye.

‘You might learn some humility and *empathy* if you experience life as an Omega,’ Will retorts, gathering up Jack’s crockery before retreating into the kitchen.

He dumps everything next to the sink and leans against the counter, taking several deep, shaky breaths in an attempt to calm his roiling emotions. Being around Hannibal is difficult; his betrayal is still a raw, pulsing pain, his fury a blazing inferno in his chest, but, underneath it all, his bond is a soothing balm, and all Will wants to do is be held by his Alpha. Especially if his suspicions are true.

What the fuck am I going to do?

Scrubbing his cheeks, Will forces the problem as far into the recesses of his mind as he can, and stomps back through the dining room, into the study. It’s a problem for tomorrow, when he’s alone and can *think.*

As always with Hannibal, there is a cheery fire crackling in the hearth, and the other man glances up from pouring Scotch into crystal tumblers, taking a moment to smile a greeting at his mate. Will thuds down onto the sofa, reaching for the first glass and wondering if he’s imagining his liquid looking slightly paler than Jack’s.

Now I’m getting paranoid. But I am mated to a psychopath…

Hannibal smiles, purring almost imperceptibly to encourage Will to accept the glass of alcohol-free whiskey on offer. He hands Jack a normal Scotch, resigning himself to a poor imitation of his favorite drink whilst in his pregnant mate's company, and sits beside Will on the leather couch before raising his glass to toast.

'To new beginnings.'

He smiles at Will as they all take a sip, hiding his grimace at the taste. At least he's been able to add a little of his own blood to the mix; blitzing it the same way he did for his dinner party, releasing a clear, sweet liquid that makes the imitation spirit more palatable.

'To rekindling old friendships,' Jack adds, throwing another pointed look at Will, who gulps more of his drink.

'To sleeping with the enemy,' the Omega mutters, shrugging and draining his glass under Jack's glare and Hannibal's carefully blank expression. 'And all it might entail.'

'Will…'

'No, Jack.' Hannibal shrugs, and gives Will's knee a comforting pat. 'It's quite alright. Will is entitled to his opinions.'

However wrong, Will finishes, rolling his eyes at them both. He holds his tumbler out, silently demanding more alcohol, and Hannibal rises to refill it without complaint. Will wonders if he knows. If he cares.

Do I care?

With Will so preoccupied, Jack is left to fill the silence once again, though he seems annoyingly content to allow the quiet space between them all to breathe, breaking it only with the odd 'mm' of enjoyment as he sips his own drink. Will taps a nervous rhythm against the tumbler, painfully aware that Hannibal, when he returned from filling up his whiskey a second time, has now closed the gap between them and draped his arm across the back of the sofa, his hand loitering near Will's shoulders.

Scant inches from my crest, if he wanted to play with it.

He hides his shiver in another sip. The whiskey is delicious, leaving him feeling warm and comfortable, but it doesn't seem to be dulling his senses as much as normal. His mind turns over the possibilities, searching for answers, for reasons amidst all the madness.

Maybe it's a sign that he's been drinking too much. Maybe he's just too nervous to feel inebriated. He knows what's coming, after all.

Maybe it's not really whiskey. Does he know? Is it true?

As the clock chimes ten, Jack predictably drains the last of his Scotch and heaves himself to his feet.

‘Well, this has been a *wonderful* evening, Dr Lecter,’ he says, shaking with Hannibal when the other man rises with him. ‘But I really must be going. Will, I’ll see you soon.’

‘Let me show you to the door,’ Hannibal says, giving Will’s arm a quick squeeze on his way past, promising a hasty return before leaving to bid Jack goodnight. Will has been unusually subdued since his bout of nausea, his blue eyes stormy and a muscle jumping in his jaw despite his silence. His scent, hot and honey-sweet from pregnancy, holds a lingering salt trace of worry, and Hannibal wonders if he’s piecing together the symptoms. The timeline. Or if he simply thinks himself ill.

He waits until Jack’s taillights have disappeared around the end of the street before closing and locking the front door, returning to the study with his own stomach roiling in nervous anticipation. He finds Will sitting very still on the couch, his final sip of whiskey cradled between both hands, troubled eyes locked on the fire.

Hannibal approaches slowly, wary of startling him, and sits deliberately carefully, leaving a space between them now that they are alone.

‘Would you like me to drive you home?’ he asks, the choice of words hanging heavy between them, painful to them both. This house is no longer part of Will’s home.

Will sighs, an unhappy frown creasing his brow.

‘I… don’t know,’ he admits, swirling his whiskey and taking a tiny sip. ‘The dogs are with the sitter… They’ll be fine until morning.’

Hope flares in Hannibal’s heart, warming him with the forethought. Will has clearly considered the possibility of spending the night here.

‘Perhaps another drink?’ he suggests, rising smoothly to fetch the decanter, knowing without looking that Will is nodding and holding out his glass for a refill. He pours them both a generous measure, relaxing as Will takes a tip and sinks down, tilting his head back over the rolled edge of the leather neck-rest with his eyes closed as he appreciates the flavors on his tongue.

‘Have you given any further thought to our conversation?’ Hannibal asks, when the silence becomes brittle with tension once again. ‘Do you feel ready to continue?’

Will frowns without opening his eyes, fingers tightening a fraction around his tumbler.

‘I’m still *undecided*.’

‘About me?’ Hannibal asks, risking the pain Will’s rejection will cause him.

‘About everything. About *us*.’ Will’s gold-ringed eyes open, slanting sideways to slide over Hannibal’s face, not settling on anything before the lids slam shut again, hiding him from his Alpha’s possessive view.

The loss is like a physical ache, and Hannibal reaches for him before he can stop himself, brushing his palm over Will’s knuckles, earning another soft growl.

‘Whatever you decide,’ he says, ignoring the threat, ‘I will do my best to honor it, Will.’

‘“Do your best”,’ Will huffs, blinking away hot tears and raising bright eyes to the ceiling. He pulls back, away from Hannibal, and gulps the whiskey down, handing his Alpha the empty glass. ‘You always have a way of getting *exactly* what you want, don’t you?’

Hannibal sets the tumbler beside his, quiet for a moment as he considers his mate’s resentful words, and then dips his head to catch Will’s eye.

‘Alright. Tell me what *you* want, Will.’

‘What *I* want?’

Will sits upright, crossing his arms so that he’s hugging himself at the desperate misery bubbling up inside him. Hannibal can’t *give* him what he wants. What he *wants* is to be mated to a kind and caring Alpha. Someone he can have a normal family with. Someone *safe.* Someone who only wants the *best* for him.

Not the Chesapeake fucking Ripper. Not a cannibal. A murderer.

Hasn’t he given you all those things, though?

A small voice whispers the words in the back of his mind, slithering from the shadows like a snake. It’s not Hannibal’s voice, he hears, but his own, speaking truths he doesn’t want to hear.

In his own way, hasn’t he kept you safe? Doesn’t he want you to be the best possible version of yourself? To join him in that glorious darkness, and rule the world with him?

Don’t you think you have a child inside you?

Will sniffs, and ducks his head even as he shakes it. Tries to dismiss the crooning, seductive tug of his subconscious. Hannibal is a killer. A manipulative psychopath. He *killed* Abigail. Made Will think *he’d* killed and eaten her. Had him incarcerated, at risk of execution. God knows what he’d do if he thought Will was *pregnant.*

‘I want…’ He falters, his voice thick. ‘I, um…’ Jumps when Hannibal takes his hands again, reaching out to hold them between his own, brushing his golden thumbs across the pale blue veins of his inner wrists.

Another gulp, willing his voice to hold as he tries again.

‘I want you to Court me,’ he whispers, glancing up into his mate’s crimson eyes, managing to hold the gaze, this time. ‘Properly. No hidden agendas. No secrets. I want to know you. To set the rules and have you follow them. I want to bond you back, if I earn it.’

Hannibal holds very still, barely daring to breathe as Will describes his terms. He doesn’t nod immediately, no matter how tempting it is, because he knows that Will wants him to really think about it.

The offer, *and* the commitment.

To be truly known. Truly seen…

Accepted for all that he is, and bonded in turn. Bound to his Omega, as certain to die as Will would, if they were ever to separate.

Will swallows, and pushes himself to his feet, pacing restlessly before the fire as the idea takes hold.

It's the only way. The only way to be sure. To protect the baby.

'I don't want to know if you're fucking Alana. I don't care. But I'm not going to be faithful to you, either, Hannibal, until I can trust you again. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' Hannibal growls, his eyes blazing at the idea of someone else touching Will, taking him into their body or entering him. As threats go, it's perfect. Hannibal is a jealous lover, and this is one way in which Will can take control back from him. Though he has no intention of breaking things off with Alana just yet; not whilst Will is so volatile. She is the perfect leverage.

'I'll come to you for three therapy appointments a week,' Will continues, wiping tingling palms on his thighs. 'Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays. 7.30, just as before. They can be our "dates". Outside of that, you don't call, or write, or send me gifts. If *I* want to speak to you, I'll approach you. Agreed?'

'Yes.'

Hannibal slides from the couch, kneeling before the other man, his eyes upturned and a hand extended. He trembles when Will reaches for him, linking their fingers together, and then brings it to his face once more, rubbing his shaven cheek over the calloused skin and soft wrist, marking him with his scent just as surely as he marks his own face with Will's.

'It would be my honor to Court you, Will,' he says, surprising himself with the truth of it. 'To win you back.'

Will turns his face away and nods, his jaw working as he considers everything before him.

'And you are *never* going to use sex as a way to manipulate me again, *Dr Lecter*,' he finishes. 'Do you understand? When we fuck, or make love, we do it because we *both* want to, for the same reasons. Not to avoid an argument, or a difficult conversation, or because it's more *convenient* than dealing with the shitstorm that is our relationship. You can do that with anyone else, but not with *me*.'

'You want to talk,' Hannibal says, doing whatever he can to reassure Will that he is listening to him. 'You want more than just sex.'

'If this is going to have any chance of working between us, we need to be *partners*,' Will says, his voice wobbling and eyes bright. 'You can be my psychiatrist when I come to see

you… Help me move past everything that's happened… But every hour between? We're equals.'

You're always my equal, Will, Hannibal thinks, smiling up at him from his place on the floor. *You just don't realize it, yet.*

Will sighs, and scrubs his beard. He looks heavenward one last time and then grabs Hannibal's face between both hands to smash their mouths together in a bruising kiss. They steal the air from each other until neither can see properly, their purrs mingling and ringing out in the otherwise silent room, a perfect harmony of deep and high, rough and soft, Alpha and Omega.

'*Fuck*,' Will gasps, pressing the curse into Hannibal's jaw as the other man struggles to his feet, arching his back up as Hannibal wraps his arms around him and holds him close, shielding and protecting him from the world. From the monster inside his person suit. 'I still hate you,' he moans, his hands roving over Hannibal's suit, shoving at the shoulders of his jacket to get it off. 'But I want you so *much*…'

'Stay here with me,' Hannibal pleads, shrugging out of his jacket and tossing it unceremoniously over the back of the couch, heedless of the expensive fabric. He slides his fingers through Will's dark curls, petting his cheeks and nuzzling at his chin, relishing every texture of his mate's body. 'Whatever you want; even to talk and sleep. Just spend the night with me. Let me hold you.'

'I'm so angry with you, I can barely *think,* let alone make decisions,' Will replies. He glares at him, tightening his grip into a fist in the back of Hannibal's ashen hair and wrenching his head to the side. 'You're right; when I look at you, all I want to do is hurt you.'

'Then hurt me,' Hannibal says, his dark gaze so steady that it snatches Will's breath, making him falter. He draws back a step, not trusting himself, his hand falling to the bulge of Hannibal's upper arm.

'What?'

'Hurt me,' Hannibal repeats. 'Whatever you need to do to me, Will. I'm yours.'

Will considers him for a long moment, black fire dancing between thickening rings of gold. The temptation is strong; he *wants* to tear into Hannibal, to mess him up and make him bleed, make him *feel* the same helplessness and fear that Will has suffered, but, at the same time, he knows it won't fix anything. It won't move them forwards, and there's too much at stake to fail.

'That's… probably something we should discuss in my therapy,' he says, forcing down the writhing serpent, reinforcing the idea of gentleness by stroking Hannibal's arm, his fingertips rasping over the thick material of his shirt. He sighs, and makes a show of removing his glasses, setting them next to the Scotch tumblers and shrugging out of his own blazer. 'Play for me, instead.'

Hannibal schools the surprise from his expression, curious by his own disappointment. He has never considered himself to be a masochist, or remotely submissive, but Will has a way of stripping him bare and reducing him to a plaything, and, for some reason, he loves it. He nods, and turns on silent feet to lead the way out into the foyer, where the antique instrument sits waiting.

'Is there a specific piece you'd like to hear?' he asks, settling himself on the bench.

'An original composition,' Will replies, perching beside him, their shoulders brushing and outer thighs pressed together, reminding Hannibal of the night with Alana, when she had so casually invaded his personal space and produced such horrific sounds from the gut strings.

This is, by far, a better memory.

'Very well,' he says, stretching his long fingers over the ivory keys. He begins to play the piece that he wrote after his attack, starting with low, melancholic notes, creating a dark and pensive atmosphere between them. From the corner of his eye, he sees Will swallow, hearing the message and *understanding*, even on an instinctive level, what this music represents.

Hannibal's skill on the harpsichord is eclipsed only by his ability to create such gut-wrenching and emotionally charged music. Watching his mate's strong hands wield the harpsichord, producing quivering, nasal notes into the echoing space of the foyer, Will can *feel* himself moving through his grief, experiencing his shock and bone-chilling *fear* at being made so very vulnerable by another Alpha, by *Will*, followed by crushing despair and doubt. The music lightens, then, reflecting his relief at recovering, at Will's safety and their reunion. His joy at strengthening their bond again… The notes become bouncy, and more flamboyant; testament to his cruel pleasure at playing with Jack, Alana and the others at the FBI. Cat-and-mouse, the eternal hunt, a chase most primal…

He's so happy to be alive, even as he plans to kill others.

Will keeps his eyes resolutely open, flicking between Hannibal's slender hands and his enraptured face, his dark shadow swelling and pulsing in time to the tempo. There's something else in the music; an underlying joy, and a passion so strong that, as Hannibal reaches it, he moves forwards into the notes, closing his eyes as he hits the crescendo of the arrangement, Will feels a lump form in his throat, tears spilling down his cheeks as a fierce pride and thick devotion storms their bond, flooding his body with endorphins, pebbling his skin and raising the fine hairs across the back of his neck. His crest flares with heat, swelling to press up against the square of silk he's sewn into all of his shirts, and he finds himself reaching for Hannibal's knee, giving it a squeeze as the other man hits the final, thrumming note.

Fuck… He knows.

'That was beautiful,' he whispers, leaving his hand on his Alpha's thigh. Hannibal looks down at him, his eyes glowing, and Will barely has a second to snatch a breath before his mate's hot lips are descending on his again, capturing his mouth in a kiss that strips him of any thought besides *Hannibal.*

Stirred by the music, remembering his happiness at learning of Will's pregnancy, Hannibal holds his mate's face between both hands and lavishes affection on him, showing him with more than words how much he cares. How proud and pleased he is to be the father to Will's child.

Our child.

And Will melts beautifully beneath his touch, moaning gently as Hannibal's slick tongue coaxes his own out to be caught between sharp, dangerous teeth, Alpha fangs threatening to break the surface and spill his blood before retreating and soothing him with licks and sucks that shoot liquid fire straight to both of their groins, obvious rom the sudden thickening of their scents and the shifting as pants become uncomfortably tight.

'Mm…' Will combs his hands through Hannibal's silky hair, dragging him impossibly closer. They scramble to their feet, unwilling to break the kiss for even a moment, but for all its frantic need, it is deep and tender; more than just carnal want, and they barely make it two steps away before stopping to concentrate on the kiss again.

Will's heart is racing, trying to batter its way out of his chest, and lightning zings up and down his spine, crackling with every touch of Hannibal's fingers, lips and tongue. He needs him with a frightening intensity, and presses up against him because otherwise there's too much distance, and he's too alone in this world.

'Let me make love to you,' Hannibal begs, cradling him close and nuzzling his way along Will's jaw to the hollow of his throat, where he suckles a blooming mark into the column of creamy skin, rewarded by Will fumbling with the buttons of his waistcoat, his silver cufflinks and silk tie in reply.

'Only if you talk to me,' Will says, breathy and glassy-eyed as Hannibal's fangs graze the swollen scent gland beside his windpipe, the little nub aching to be bitten. 'You… mm… You have to *tell* me things about you at the same –' He shudders, clutching Hannibal tight when the skin breaks, a wave of pleasure making his knees buckle. '*Fuck!* At the same t-time,' he manages, before giving up trying to speak in favor of purring.

Hannibal grins into the wound, lapping at Will's succulent blood, and gathers up handfuls of his Omega's glorious backside, hauling their hips together and rocking his hardness against Will's to elicit a long, low moan from the other man.

'I'll tell you whatever you like,' he promises, reaching even lower and pulling Will up, encouraging him to wrap his legs around his waist so he can carry him.

Will laughs, tipping his head back and away from Hannibal's mouth before looking at him.

'How strong *are* you?' he asks, resisting the invitation until he knows Hannibal won't drop him. Hannibal grins, a feral light in his eyes, and gathers him closer again, bracing as Will jumps to help him, winding his strong legs tight around the Alpha's waist and locking his ankles together.

‘*Strong*,’ Hannibal purrs, carrying him with ease, walking towards the stairs so they can relocate to the bedroom. ‘Carrying a full-grown man is no hardship for me.’

‘Convenient,’ Will mutters, but he doesn’t want to dwell on bad memories now, so he softens it with a grin, looping his arms around Hannibal’s neck and leaning down to kiss him before Hannibal ascends the stairs. It’s disconcerting, to be carried in such a way, with his erection digging into Hannibal’s firm abdomen, but the feel of Hannibal’s muscles rippling under his thighs sends arousal zinging through him, and he can’t help but like it.

‘When did you lose your virginity?’ he asks, peppering Hannibal’s forehead with kisses as they reach the landing, headed for the bedroom at the end of the hall. ‘What was it like?’

‘To a man, young,’ Hannibal says, kicking open the door and carrying Will past his Aunt Murasaki’s ancestral armor to drape him over the bed and cover his body with his own. Their legs tangle, hips pressed flush together, and he seeks out Will’s soft lips, stubbled cheeks and thundering pulse. ‘To a woman, I was older. It was…’ He smirks, deftly unbuttoning Will’s powder blue shirt to lay his chest bare for the taking. ‘*Uninspiring*.’

Bringing Hannibal’s head down, Will rewards his honesty with unfettered access to his nipples, the dusky brown nubs tightening to stiff peaks under sharp teeth and a hot, wet tongue. Hannibal suckles him, moaning softly at the sweet flavor of his skin, grinning at the idea of bruising another mark of ownership around them both, curving his back into Will’s hands as broad palms stroke down his spine.

‘Who taught you to play the harpsichord?’ Will asks, running his fingers over and over through Hannibal’s hair, fighting the desperate urge to drag the other man to his mouth and be done with the questions.

Hannibal laps at Will’s left nipple, grinning at the shudders such attention elicits from his hypersensitive mate, massaging his inner thighs and squeezing his knees to vary the sensations. He kisses and licks a glistening trail down Will’s abdomen, swirling and plunging his tongue in and out of his navel until Will bucks, driving his hardness up towards Hannibal’s throat, seeking friction against the seam crushing his erection.

‘My mother,’ he answers, the blanket of heavy breathing broken by the clink of Will’s belt buckle. Hannibal pulls the leather through the loops and lays the cool strip flat over his Omega’s fluttering stomach, admiring the way Will’s muscles contract beneath the material. ‘She was an exceptional pianist, and the harpsichord had been in her family for generations.’

‘What’s your favorite sex position?’ Will asks, reaching up to push Hannibal’s gaping waistcoat off his shoulders. He tosses it and the balled-up tie towards the chair near the fireplace, kissing along Hannibal’s jawline as he makes short work of his Alpha’s shirt buttons. ‘With everyone else and with me.’

‘From behind,’ Hannibal murmurs, bracing himself with his elbows locked above Will before dipping to kiss him, deeply and slowly, with their bare chests pressed together once both shirts are open. ‘With you? *Anything*, Will.’ Another kiss, smiling into his mouth as he admits, ‘But I love it when you ride me. I love seeing you… Seeing you enjoy yourself, seeing you *own* your body…’

‘Odd, given how out of control you made me,’ Will retorts, frowning at his partner, his captor, his *murderer*, and remembering, at the crease of confusion between Hannibal’s brows, what Bedelia Du Maurier had said to him when she’d come to visit him in the hospital.

‘I am convinced Hannibal has done what he honestly believes is best for you.’

‘Last question,’ he says, drawing Hannibal back down and distracting himself with a kiss on the tip of his Alpha’s nose. ‘What do you see in our future?’

‘I see us,’ Hannibal replies, immediate and certain, gazing into Will’s eyes without hesitation. ‘I see family.’

Will’s chest constricts and he grabs his Alpha by the back of his head, shaking his own before slamming their mouths back together. He chases the arousal pooling in his gut, letting the spark fan itself into a flame, seeking the consuming oblivion of climax so he doesn’t have to think about everything that goes with that statement. That promise.

Family. Home. A place to belong. To be myself. Accepted and loved for who I really am.

A child with Hannibal Lecter.

‘Fuck me,’ he whispers, spreading his legs and bending his knees to better cradle Hannibal between his thighs. He shoves at Hannibal’s shirt, pushing it down his arms until his Alpha’s tawny skin is free, breaking the kiss to mouth along the other man’s collarbone and the round of his shoulders, stroking and squeezing Hannibal’s muscles, marveling at the size and strength of his mate.

‘I love you,’ Hannibal murmurs, nuzzling his cheek again, mirroring his Omega’s actions and pushing his thick shirt from his arms. He rears back, sliding off the end of the bed to kneel between Will’s legs, tugging off his boots and socks as he toes out of his own. He reaches up to unbutton the slacks, tugging the zipper down and pulling them from Will’s lean thighs, grinning up under a shock of blond hair at the sight of damp, straining boxers. ‘Beautiful boy.’

‘Not a boy,’ Will mumbles, his cheeks flushing at the compliment. He reaches for him, his eyes gleaming like sapphires dipped in gold. ‘Get back up here.’

‘Yes, my love.’ Hannibal grins as he obeys, crawling back up to cover Will’s body with his own. He lifts his pelvis, helping to wriggle out of his trousers when Will reaches down to undo them and push them off, and maneuvers them so that they are lying with their heads at the foot of the bed, nearest to the heat of the lit fire, both stripped down to their underwear and pressed together to send delightful sparks of pleasure through their bodies with every shift.

Will cups Hannibal’s cheek, stretched out beneath him, one knee crooked to hold him close. He leans up, kissing Hannibal tenderly, taking his time to taste and appreciate his lips and tongue, stroking over the silvery fur covering his chest, squeezing his nipples until Hannibal’s breath catches and tracing the contours of his back as Hannibal hugs him.

'Tave myliu,' Hannibal whispers, his own hands mapping every crease of Will's torso, studying the growing softness of his pectorals as pregnancy adjusts his Omegan body to suit the baby's needs, sweeping down the still-flat planes of his abdomen to pluck at the elasticated waist keeping him hidden. 'I want to taste you again.'

'I know,' Will says, his voice husky and eyes heavy. He lets his legs fall open, welcoming Hannibal between them, and he nods when the Alpha glances up at him for permission.

Hannibal grins, burying his nose into the cheap cotton of Will's briefs to suck up the smell of him. His mate's gloriously smoky, sugar-sweet scent is strongest here, begging to be guzzled down and sharpened further with pleasure, and he peels the sticky material from Will's hardness in one decisive movement.

Will hums a moan as the cool air hits his cock, absently reaching down to give his quivering shaft a stroke. He gathers up the pearly droplets with his thumb, blushing again but holding Hannibal's gaze as he holds it out in offering, his breath hitching when the Alpha wraps his hot mouth around it in eager acceptance.

Hannibal sucks at the salty moisture, laving Will's digit with affection reminiscent of what he wants to do to his throbbing flesh, rewarded with a low, throaty moan from the Omega. From the corner of his eye, he sees more evidence of Will's arousal bead on the quivering tip, sliding down to coat the taut skin, and he abandons Will's hand to lick it up in a sweep of his tongue.

'Hah! Fuck!' Will slams his hips down to keep from bucking up at the sudden rasp of his Alpha's tongue, his heart hammering and ass spilling a gush of slick. He's still not fully used to Hannibal going down on him, to taking him into his mouth the way that way, and that was such a shock of sensation that it caught him off-guard. He props himself up on his elbows and drops his head back, baring his throat and all of his front to his mate. Hannibal settles between his bent knees with a rumbling purr, kissing and sucking at the furiously pink head of his erection until Will keens.

Grinning at his own ability, *aching* with desire at the delicious sounds that Will makes, Hannibal continues to pleasure him, fondling the hot weight of his sac with one hand and letting his mate rock into the shallow cave of his wet mouth as he slides the other back to press a finger to the ring of clenching muscle behind a strip of velvet-soft skin.

Will groans, canting his hips up to encourage Hannibal to push inside him, tucking his heels under him with barely a care for how he must look. It's almost a pleasure in itself; to be the picture of wanton lust, willing to do anything for his Alpha's touch. His knot. Embarrassing and fun all at once.

'There,' he breathes, keeping his eyes resolutely closed, ears tuned to the wet, sucking noises of Hannibal's mouth and the crackling of the fire. The symphony of their breathing and the steady tick of the old alarm clock on Hannibal's bedside table. 'Mm, *there*.'

'*Beautiful*, Will,' Hannibal whispers, nibbling kisses up and down the throbbing veins of his Omega's erection as he gathers up the slippery slick pouring from his body, wetting two

fingers and swirling them against the burning barrier of skin keeping him from his rightful place. ‘Relax.’

‘I *am* relaxed,’ Will murmurs, but he drapes an arm over his eyes to simulate a blindfold just in case, robbing himself of the ability to tense as Hannibal’s first finger breaches him. It’s tight, and, for just a moment, he worries that the Alpha won’t fit, that it will hurt, but then his body gives and the muscles suck him in deep, clenching around the knuckle.

‘*That’s* it,’ Hannibal purrs, thrusting slowly and surely into Will’s silky passage, reaching for the spot that will make him writhe. ‘That’s it. I’ve got you.’

‘I know,’ Will says, his arm still over his eyes. He shudders when Hannibal’s mouth closes around him again, unsure of which way to move. He bears down around the finger brushing teasingly close to the perfect spot inside him, and hears his own voice catch in a whimper when Hannibal adds another, stretching him with an ache and then suddenly finding what he needs, pleasure making him very, very hot. ‘Th-there! There!’

Proud of himself, thoroughly pleased to see Will so freely seeking his pleasure, Hannibal repeats the crooking motion with his fingers, sucking and swirling his tongue at the straining hardness in a punishing rhythm that leaves Will falling apart, unsure which way to push, especially helpless when Hannibal rears up and hooks his legs over his shoulders, leaving him entirely at his mercy.

That’s my boy, Hannibal thinks, his bond singing with joy as Will submits to him, dropping both arms to the navy bedspread and clutching fistfuls of velvet as he judders and bucks into the sensations, his skin flushed pink and shining with sweat. He purrs, a deep, rich, Alpha sound, when his own cotton-glad hardness presses against the covers, his balls jumping up against his body at the tingling ache. With every sound uttered, every glimpse of Will like this, Hannibal doubts more and more his ability to resist climax the moment he buries himself inside his Omega’s pulsing, pleasure-soaked body.

‘H-Hannibal…’ Will gulps, his eyes flying open to stare at his handsome Alpha, muscles contracting as white pleasure climbs higher and higher, threatening to shatter him. ‘I’m gonna come… I’m gonna come…’

Hannibal nods, repeating the dangerously nice sucking motion, hollowing out his cheeks as he digs ever deeper to draw Will’s climax from him. Will clenches his teeth, his toes curling and legs tightening, thighs shaking as he resists the urge to squeeze Hannibal’s head. The restriction lends a sharpness to the pleasure, and he groans again, convulsing as waves of molten fire crash through him. It’s too much, it’s too good, and Hannibal just *doesn’t* stop….

He comes hard, spilling into his Alpha’s waiting mouth, gripping tight to the fingers inside him, his inner muscles working to lock tight around a knot. It’s a rich, heady feeling; red and gold, like *home* and safe harbor in a storm, and tears well in his eyes as Will rides the high of his orgasm, his chest heaving before he collapses, grinning like an idiot.

‘*That* looked good,’ Hannibal croons, licking his lips clean and wiping a stray trickle from his chin. He slips his fingers free, drawing a final shudder from the boneless Omega, and wipes them on his boxers as he pulls them off. ‘You taste *divine*, Will.’

‘Not as good as you,’ Will mumbles, drawing him down for a kiss, fumbling to get a hand between them so he can line Hannibal’s hardness up with his ready entrance. ‘Fuck me.’

‘Crude boy,’ Hannibal whispers, softening the admonishment with a kiss on the nose. He hisses when Will guides him to press his throbbing tip against the fluttering muscles, and holds his breath at the give, sliding every inch of himself into his mate’s hot, slippery channel. ‘*Mmm*... Though I… understand the… sentiment…’

He groans, covering Will’s body with his own, shielding and claiming as he moves within him. Will keens again, clutching him close, rolling his hips in unison with the Alpha, angling down to get just the right rasp of Hannibal’s length against his prostate.

‘F-*fuck*,’ Will breathes, closing his eyes and pressing a burning cheek to Hannibal’s, wrapping around him and matching his Alpha thrust for thrust. ‘God, Hannibal, you feel *so* good.’

‘You’re mine, Will,’ Hannibal growls, reiterating it with a snap of his hips that has Will mewling. He bites down into Will’s neck, groaning in pleasure at the taste of his blood, watching it well from the ring of teeth marks when he rears up and slams into him, again and again, utterly willing to be unmade by the orgasm rushing upon him. ‘You’re *mine!’*

‘And you’re mine,’ Will gasps, digging his nails into Hannibal’s flanks so that he is as far as he can possibly be inside him, bending his body up and around to take him to the hilt, muscles gripping around the swelling knot as Hannibal starts to come. ‘You’re fucking *mine*, Hannibal!’

Hannibal comes with a snarl, ripping another ragged bitemark into Will’s chest as he goes rigid, pumping his seed deep inside his Omega’s body, trapped there by the thick flesh locking them together.

‘Will you say it?’ he breathes, tracing his lips over Will’s sweaty forehead and furrowed brows, hands reverently stroking his arms, shoulders and chest now that the furious need to seal himself inside his mate his passed. ‘Will you say that you’re mine?’

‘When I am,’ Will replies, offering Hannibal his throat in appeasement and twining their fingers together. ‘When *you’re* mine*,* as well.’

‘We’re still bonded,’ Hannibal whispers, kissing Will’s thundering pulse and suckling at the sensitive skin just beneath his ear to hide his hurt and confusion. ‘We’re still bonded… Aren’t we?’

‘Yes,’ Will promises, stroking his hair to soothe him. ‘We’re still bonded. But I won’t *say* it until you *earn* it. Do you understand?’

Hannibal stills, considering Will’s words. He hums, nodding slowly, and purrs as he nuzzles Will’s jaw and lips, seeking forgiveness. Will kisses him, granting it, and Hannibal smiles down at him, a fierce glow in his maroon eyes.

‘I’ll earn it, Will. I promise you.’

Repressing the flare of happiness at such honest determination, Will sternly reminds himself that Hannibal is a *killer*. He can't help but smile back, though, and settles beneath his Alpha's comforting weight as sleep steals over him.

There's no way I'm getting out of this alive.

***

Sunday morning finds Hannibal driving out to a livery yard at Jack's behest, once he had dropped Will safely at home. His Omega had been quiet on the drive back, but he'd given Hannibal a parting kiss and watched him off, strengthening the bond they had rekindled with their lovemaking the night before, and warming Hannibal's heart with hope for their next steps together.

Now, in a cold stall that smells like death and manure, he crouches before the dead Thoroughbred and peers at his own slanted reflection in its glassy obsidian eyes. Jimmy Price and Zeller are off to the side, examining the body of the young woman found inside the mare's womb shortly after dawn. The poor veterinarian had been near-senseless with panic after cutting open the animal, expecting to find, not a human, but a dead foal, and the stable manager had met them outside, but refused to enter the barn again when Jack and his team arrived.

'I agree with the Pagans; the horse is divine,' Hannibal says, stroking the mare's stiff neck, tangling his fingers in the mane so similar to that of his childhood horse, Cesar. 'All beasts of burden are sacred animals.'

Too lovely to be used in such a way.

'This kind of mutilation usually presents as cult activity,' Jack says, glaring down at the dead animal as if he can summon answers from it by sheer force of will.

'When an animal is sacrificed, it's presumed the power of the beast will be psychically transported to whoever's offering up the goods,' Jimmy adds, leaning over the dead woman to photograph her. Hannibal hums, still crouched by the mare.

'Which is why sacrificial animals should be healthy,' he replies. 'Without any defects.' He looks round at Jack. 'This horse was sick.'

'The womb is more or less intact,' Zeller says, speaking to both Alphas. He glances down at the corpse again, and then back up. 'The victim was deceased *before* she was enwombed.' He runs his blue torch over the skin, checking for tissue damage. 'The ecchymosis of the subcutaneous tissue is consistent with pr–'

'She was strangled,' Jimmy interrupts, earning a scowl from the other Beta. He gives him a good-natured pat on the shoulder. 'It's a little wordy.'

Zeller subsides with a low growl and lifts back the woman's eyelids, examining the milky-white film of death and splotchy red of broken capillaries.

‘Yeah… and she was scrappy,’ he murmurs, shaking his head at the waste of such an attractive woman. ‘She put up a fight, Jack.’

‘The horse is a chrysalis,’ Hannibal says, rising when Jack looks puzzled. ‘A cocoon meant to hold the young woman until her death could be transformed.’

‘Transformed into *what?’* Jack demands, his eyes flickering crimson. Hannibal steps away from him, careful where he places his thousand dollar shoes on the wood-shaven floor, and glances from the corpse to the dead horse.

‘Life,’ he says, his tone warming with a purr of understanding. ‘A new life.’

A beautiful sentiment.

He gazes down at the split-open belly of the mare, seeing the elegance in the gesture.

‘This is a birth.’ He shrugs, considering the stitching. ‘Or, it was *intended* to be.’ Crouching again, he continues, ‘This is *every* bit as much about giving life as it is taking it.’

Jack sighs, biting off a growl of frustration.

‘What’s the *thinking* here, Doctor?’ he demands, sighing when Hannibal simply replies,

‘Conflicted. I see what he’s done. I don’t understand why he’s done it.’ Hannibal shakes his head. ‘This killer doesn’t think like anyone else, Jack.’

As he rises, his own irises warm to burgundy as he adds,

‘You’ll have to find someone who doesn’t think like anyone else to catch him.’

You need Will.

***

Clownfish and blue tangs scatter when a struggling Omega is slammed against the glass of the fish tank set into the marble floor. Her broken arm is pinned up behind her back, and a knee crushes the nape of her neck, where a crest would be if her father hadn’t strictly forbidden Mason from claiming her.

She moans, her golden eyes leaking tears that smudge her mascara down bruised cheeks, painted nails scraping against the clear surface as she fights the grip of the Beta male holding her down. There’s no use. She is as powerless to stop him now as she was earlier when he came to her bed.

‘You should’ve taken the chocolate, Margot.’

The nasal, drawling voice chills her blood, making *everything* hurt just that little bit more. A green moray eel swims just beneath the surface of the water, drawn to the distant sounds of her pain. She knows, even as she cries, that this is what her brother wants; Mason slips an

arm around her neck and presses a little square of blotting paper to catch the saltwater, drying out her tear ducts until they sting.

Sickness wells, everything in her screaming that this is wrong*, wrong,* but Margot can't move; the knee jamming her neck is crushing the delicate nerves at the top of her spine, rendering her legs numb. All she can do is listen as three olives drop into her brother's martini… A martini flavored with her fear and pain.

Her tears.

The drink is downed quickly, not even savored. What's the point, when Mason knows he can just hurt her again, get another batch of tears and make more. He dumps the crystal glass on the surface of the tank beside her and wanders away, off to find a new form of entertainment, and something inside Margot breaks, dying just a little bit because the message is clear; she is nothing but trash to him, just like the used-up fruit and paper from his drink.

She's *nothing*. Not even a person. And she never will be. Because she is an Omega.

In the dim warmth of Dr Hannibal Lecter's office the following week, Margot Verger sighs, her breath misting the window as she stares out at the falling snow, finished with retelling the events leading up to her savage and *feral* attack on her dear brother, Mason.

She's been ordered to attend therapy until her "dangerous urges" have been fixed. It's this or electroshock therapy in a secure mental hospital, and she likes her hair the way it is. Long, glossy and brown. Not shaved off and rotting in a bin somewhere as she drools on herself.

Mason had dislocated her shoulder when he pinned her, and Margot wears it in a sling now to protect it as it heals. If she was allowed to drive, she wouldn't be able to; Mason's chauffeur takes her to and from the office in downtown Baltimore for her Monday, Wednesday and Thursday evening appointments.

It's Monday, and this is her first session with the good Doctor. She stands with her back to the Alpha, deceptively calm as she waits for his judgement.

'You are no more at fault for what happened to you than if you had been bitten by a mad dog,' Hannibal says, pitching his voice to be low and soothing for the frightened Omega. Margot Verger is beautiful; slim and pale with full lips and big, doe eyes, but there is a strength within her, a darkness, that reminds him beautifully of Will.

Margot turns, and eyes Hannibal with the same solemn expression she's worn since entering the office.

'Mad dogs are put down,' she reasons, and Hannibal is careful to keep his expression politely neutral despite the flare of excitement at her words.

'Is that what you hoped to accomplish when you attacked your brother?' he asks, choosing his words carefully, to needle her into anger.

Margot sniffs, her back straight and good arm hanging loose by her side. In her Prada suit, she is a striking figure; well-bred and regal.

‘Well, apparently I went about “putting him down” the wrong way,’ she drawls, rolling her eyes at him. Her hand twitches into a fist before she forces it to relax again. ‘He’s still alive.’

Hannibal’s eyes gleam. Her anger burns bright as a sun, fueling her; how glorious it will be to twist it into a black hole. To have her destroy the world around her with her fury.

‘Doing bad things to bad people makes us feel good,’ he reasons, offering her a half-shrug of understanding. ‘What’s your relationship with him now? Has it changed?’

‘I think he thinks I’ve calmed down,’ Margot says, her blue eyes swallowed by gold under the force of her true emotions. Hannibal’s pulse quickens at the spicy tang to her scent.

‘Have you?’ he asks, already knowing the answer.

Margot lowers her chin, her eyes blazing as she bares her small Omegan fangs in a dangerous snarl.

‘Oh, I’m *calm*.’

Hannibal tilts his head, considering her.

‘Are you going to try again?’

Margot looks away, weighing her answer in silence. She scoffs, a quick twist of her crimson painted lips, and walks towards the armchair across from her therapist.

‘This is where therapy gets a little tricky,’ she says, her heels clacking on the hardwood floor, pant suit trouser legs whispering against each other.

‘It doesn’t have to be tricky,’ Hannibal replies, watching her approach, wondering if she will sit, or remain on her feet. Ready to flee. Or fight.

Margot sighs, and comes to a stop near to but not touching the armchair.

‘I could confess to a murder, you can’t say a word,’ she says. ‘I could have murdered someone this *morning* and you can’t say a word.’ She tuts. ‘But if I’m *planning* to commit a murder…’

Hannibal nods.

‘I’m ethically obliged to take action to prevent that murder,’ he finishes. He sighs, and glances down at his empty notebook, aware that their first hour is nearly over. He will fill the blank pages with his observations once he is alone, drawing upon his memory to recall their conversation in perfect detail. ‘Be that as it may, if there’s no one else to protect you, Margot, you have to protect yourself.’

He glances down again, letting the silence settle between them, fostering her first seed of trust in him.

‘It would actually have been more therapeutic if you *had* killed him…’

One missed opportunity doesn’t mean surrender. There’s always next time.

***

Alana invites herself over for dinner that evening. Hannibal cooks them a rubbed beef brisket, pairing it with honey-glazed vegetables and a heavy, chocolate-flavored wine. They discuss the woman in the horse, Alana’s new classes and the persistent cold weather, neither one of them mentioning Will, his presence as Hannibal’s mate lingering like a shadow between them.

Eventually, Alana cannot resist the urge to pry. Watching Hannibal clean the plates in the kitchen sink, she fiddles with the stem of her wine glass, nervously shifting her weight from foot to foot as she chooses how best to broach the subject.

‘How’s Will?’ she asks, her voice strained and belying the tension underlying such an innocent question.

‘Better,’ Hannibal replies, busying himself with rinsing suds from the crockery. ‘He’s asked to resume his therapy with me.’

‘What?’ Alana sets her glass down, almost reaching for him before catching herself and hugging her elbows, instead. ‘Hannibal… Do you think that’s a good idea?’

‘Why wouldn’t it be?’ Hannibal replies, drying his hands off on his apron. Her concern, whilst flattering, is unnecessary, and her insistence at seeing Will as dangerous is… irritating. He hadn’t expected it to be, but it sparks his Alpha instincts to defend and protect his mate.

‘You know why,’ Alana says, her brow furrowing in concern, gazing up at him with her big blue eyes when Hannibal cups each side of her face and leans down to kiss her. She tastes like meat and alcohol, a heady combination that adds a richness to her floral and caramel sweetness.

‘I know that you worry too much,’ Hannibal whispers, stroking the pads of his thumbs along her jaw, crowding the Beta up against the worktop and covering her body with his own. ‘About me most of all.’

‘Of course I worry,’ Alana mumbles, blushing at the feel of Hannibal’s strong body and lean hips pinning her, a growing hardness nudging her thigh. ‘I have good reason to worry.’

‘Not tonight,’ Hannibal purrs, bending to claim her lips again.

He kisses her deeply, sliding his tongue past her teeth to brush her own, encouraging her to swallow the taste of him and be sated, be silenced, before sucking her own until she moans with longing. His hands slide down the curve of her waist to cup her buttocks, hauling her against his erection, and he grins as she gasps into his mouth, her lips flushed and swollen.

‘Come to bed with me,’ he says, walking backwards and tugging her with him, lifting her hands up to his tie to unknot it, his own removing his cufflinks and placing them on the dining table as they move through the room in a tangle of graceless limbs.

Alana’s scent thickens, growing smoky with desire, and Hannibal drinks it down like a man dying of thirst, his jealous anger at Will’s words – *I’m not going to be faithful to you* – burning like a hot coal in his gut. He imagines another Alpha’s hands on his Omega and he growls, mouthing along Alana’s throat to the thundering pulse just beneath her creamy skin.

‘Hannibal…’

Her breathy moan tugs at him and he gathers her close, crushing her breasts to him as he suckles a mark of dominance into her flesh. Alana is *his*, just as Will is *his*. He is an Alpha, the strongest of Alphas, a predator, and he will have whoever he wants, whenever he wants.

The words feel like a lie, but he needs them to be true.

Getting upstairs is awkward, and Alana leaves her shoes on two different steps to keep from falling, both of them laughing into their endless kisses as Hannibal helps her balance. They turn, tugging at each other’s clothing, Hannibal’s shirt rippling to the landing floor to be joined by Alana’s silk blouse, leaving her pale midriff exposed. Her breasts are cupped in black lace and wire, and Hannibal dips his mouth to the tempting crease between them, reveling in the softness before he tugs at the straps and manages to get the contraption free.

As they tumble to the bed, Alana stretched out beneath Hannibal’s larger body, the Alpha takes one of her wide, pink nipples into his mouth and sucks, hard, teasing it into a tight, sensitive bud. He rolls the other between forefinger and thumb, spreading his palm over the mound before slipping it lower, skating up under the hem of her skirt to press against the hot dampness of her panties.

‘Hannibal…’

Alana hums, her eyes half-closing as she squirms under the attention, reaching down to unbutton and unwind her skirt. Lying there, in only stockings and black French knickers, her hair tousled and eyes sparkling, she looks utterly delectable, a feast for the senses.

For some reason, though, it leaves him cold, and Hannibal’s long pause makes Alana reach up for him, chewing her lower lip in worry.

‘Is everything okay?’ she asks, searching his eyes for the cause of his hesitation.

Far from it, Hannibal thinks, but he is too committed now to falter. He needs her, after all. As both an ongoing ally and as the aforementioned leverage with Will.

‘Just admiring the beauty laid before me,’ he murmurs, drawing a delighted grin and reddening to her cheeks. He leans down, kissing her slowly, and begins to rub gentle circles over her clitoris, tracking the way her breath hitches in pleasure. ‘I want to savor you.’

‘You look like you want to devour me,’ Alana replies, moaning softly and rocking her hips towards the touch between her thighs, stroking the fur across Hannibal’s chest and massaging his bulging biceps, shivering at how *handsome* he is. How powerful. ‘It’s quite a turn-on.’

‘Good.’ Hannibal grins, flashing his Alpha fangs, and tugs at the flimsy lace, pulling it down each leg and off, until he can toss it, unwanted, across the room. When he returns his hand, he cups Alana gently, gathering up the wetness and teasing at the very tip of her entrance, feeling her pulse quicken as she spreads her legs for him.

As before, Hannibal’s arousal at the sight and sound of Alana’s pleasure is overshadowed by his regret, and his concern for what impact this may have on his relationship with Will. He knows he doesn’t have to tell his Omega of their intercourse – Will explicitly said that he didn’t want to be told – but he wonders if this is what others might refer to as guilt. This churning indecision rendering him distracted, even as he slides two fingers inside the Beta’s slippery passage to prepare her for his unwilling but, thankfully, hard length.

Alana’s soft whimpers and moans map out the movements she likes most, guiding Hannibal as he brushes the pad of his other thumb over her clitoris, whisper-soft so as not to overstimulate the zinging bundle of nerves. He crooks his fingers the same way he does for Will, seeking the spot inside her that makes the skin of her chest the same ruddy pink as her face, turning his hand and pushing down against her muscles, stretching her wide enough to take him with ease.

‘Hannibal… Oh, there, *there*… Hannibal…’ Alana shudders as the Alpha slips his fingers out of her, reaching for him and stroking his cock straining at the seam of his pants. She stares with open hunger, shoving off her stockings to bare herself completely for him, as Hannibal stands to unbutton his suit trousers, pushing them and his boxers down his hairy thighs. She reaches for him, stroking the proud, curving length and heavy balls beneath his taut abdomen, grinning up through her lashes as he languishes under her affection.

‘Come here,’ she purrs, pulling him closer and wondering if he notices the flicker of disappointment on her face when he pauses to grab a condom from the side drawer. She waits for him to roll it onto himself and then welcomes him on top of her, reaching down to guide him inside her and hissing at the sudden pressure, the *ache*, before Hannibal begins to move and everything *suddenly* feels very, very nice again. ‘Oh, that’s it… That’s it…’

She clings to him, silken sheets under her back, ankles crossed at the base of Hannibal’s back, his thatch of pubic hair rubbing a delicious friction against her as their hips press together, his cock rubbing her sweet spot with every thrust of his steady, tear-jerking rhythm

Despite feigning deep interest in her as a sexual partner, Hannibal’s main train of thought is fifty miles away, in Wolf Trap with his mate.

Will is most likely settling to dinner, now, fresh-faced and windswept from a long walk with the dogs, perhaps. He still has a few ready meals, left, and Hannibal likes to think that he is plating up the oven-warmed food, taking it to the table and eating as he listens to jazz music or reads one of his books.

I wish I was there with him.

Alana comes with a sharp cry, convulsing beneath him and throwing her head back. She digs her nails into him, shuddering long and hard as an orgasm wracks her slender body, sending her heartbeat racing and her mind spiraling, and Hannibal bites back a snarl, his eyes flashing crimson as she breaks his concentration. He realizes his own hips are jumping in a furious need for release, brought on by images of Will's tousled curls and slim hands wielding his cutlery – *such an innocent image, and yet so tantalizing* – and Hannibal groans, long and low, as he spills himself into the condom, his own heart galloping, his bond crying out for the other half of himself to share this with him.

His knot tries to swell, but Hannibal has no intention of locking together with Alana, and eases out so that the cool air quickly deflates him, leaving him with a faint sense of disappointment.

I'm not sure this is worth it.

Curious as to the sense of *longing* making his chest tighten, Hannibal flops onto his back and peels the used condom from his softening penis, wrapping it in a tissue before depositing it on the side table. Everything will be wiped down and the bedding changed once Alana leaves, so, for once, he feels no revulsion at the mess.

The Beta herself hums her satisfaction as she snuggles up against his side, pulling the sheet up over her body as the sweat dries and cools her skin. She drapes a leg between Hannibal's thighs, resting one hand up on his chest, beside her head, which is pillowed on the soft muscle of his shoulder, letting the other drift near to the scars on his stomach.

'I'm not *complaining*,' she murmurs, smiling when Hannibal plays with her fingers, 'but part of me suspects we ended up here to avoid where our conversation was going.'

Hannibal slants a wry grin down at her, knowing full well that he's been caught out.

'As long as you're not complaining.'

He sighs when Alana insists on continuing,

'Too much has *happened* for us *not* to talk about this. However *pleasant* the distractions.'

Hannibal resolutely closes his eyes, relaxing into the mattress and trying to quell the urge to sedate her. Or seduce her again…

'Well, I'm *recovering* from all that's happened,' he says, pulling on her heartstrings by reminding her of his terrible injury. His need for her to be *gentle* and *understanding* with him. Not overbearing and insistent. 'So is Will,' he adds, chewing on his lower lip as his mind wanders again to his incredible mate, so far out of his reach…

He glances down to see Alana gazing up at him, her blue eyes wide and brow furrowed with unbecoming worry.

'So are you,' he whispers, nuzzling into the pillow to fill his nose with his own musk, driving away Alana's cloying scent as he says, 'I would change many things, but not that we ended

up here. Or that Will is back in therapy.'

The pain will be worth it; he's sure. Will's dark shadow will be groomed and strengthened under his careful guidance, ready to tear the world asunder when their child is born.

It's all working out exactly as he planned.

Alana huffs, and lifts herself up onto an elbow, peering down at him.

'The only thing *stranger* than finding a woman inside a horse, is seeing you back in therapy with Will Graham,' she says, a bitterness tainting her voice. Concern, perhaps, for her own tenuous position in the Alpha's life, now that his bonded mate is back in the picture.

Hannibal sniffs, and looks up at the ceiling, curious as to the extent of her jealousy.

'Is it really so strange?' he asks, ignoring the way her fingers curl into his chest hair. 'He *is* my Omega, after all.'

Alana's jaw tightens, and her eyes flash.

'He tried to *murder* you as a way of escaping his bond!'

Very jealous, it seems.

Hannibal takes a deep breath, enjoying the hot, spicy tang of her anger, and subtly shifts his jaw away from Alana in a display of dominance.

'Do you know why Will tried to kill me?' he asks, smiling dryly, even as he plays with the Beta's curling hair. 'It wasn't to avenge Beverly Katz's death… It was to prevent yours.'

He sees his words like poison-tipped darts, barbed and impossible to remove. They strike deep, and Alana's brow creases again as Hannibal continues,

'He was protecting you in the only way he felt he had left to him.'

And you… You betrayed him.

Alana swallows, clearly distressed by Hannibal's words, but her pride brings another blush to her cheeks and she shakes her head.

'I'm afraid Will opened a door inside himself,' she replies, dropping her gaze to the Alpha's chest. 'And no-one knows if it closed again… Especially not Will.'

It didn't, Hannibal thinks, swallowing the urge to purr. He gazes at the play of light and shadow from the flames in the fireplace, a small smile curving the corners of his mouth as he thinks of his one true equal. *And I have no intention of letting it close ever again.*

'Then it's healthy that he's back in therapy,' he says, no longer willing to discuss his mate. 'With a good psychiatrist.'

He grins down at her, and leans in for another kiss.

She seems to need further distraction.

***

‘Her name is Sarah Craber.’

Jimmy Price peels back the autopsy sheet as he speaks, revealing the bruised and bloated corpse of the woman found inside the dead horse yesterday morning.

‘She was a horse groom at the stables where her body was found,’ he continues, glancing over towards Jack Crawford, who stands at the foot of the table. ‘She was reported missing last week.’

Across from him, in identical white lab coat, gloves and goggles, Brian Zeller gestures down towards the body as he adds,

‘Got a hand-spread on her neck, but we didn’t find anything on her, except, y’know, horse uterus.’ He shrugs at the Alpha, whose scowl deepens above burgundy eyes.

Price chuckles and rolls his eyes.

‘The uterus isn’t always such a safe, forgiving environment,’ he says. ‘Shark fetuses cannibalize each other in utero. And chances are *very* good everybody in this room absorbed a twin.’ He shrugs. ‘Mine survived.’

Zeller, who had been peering more closely at the body during Price’s little biology lesson, gestured with his penlight.

‘Her throat’s obstructed. You wanna…?’ He motions for some help, and Price leans in, pulling on the lower jaw to open the cadaver’s mouth.

‘Yep… Yeah, it’s soil.’

‘Someone’s packed it in there real good, too,’ Zeller says, prodding it with his tweezers. ‘It’s not even on her teeth…’

It dislodges, unleashing a cloud of foul-smelling breath, and Zeller rears back, protecting his face.

‘Eugh!’

‘You dropped it!’ Price admonishes, shaking his head at his partner’s clumsiness. ‘*I’ll* get it.’

‘Thanks,’ Zeller mumbles, pocketing his light and wiping himself down, his skin itching from exposure to dead-breath.

‘I’ll test the PH levels,’ Price adds, leaning his arm on the body so he can balance himself as he collects up the throat mud. ‘See what kind of organic matter or trace elements we come up

with.' He turns to Jack, seeking to reassure their boss after Zeller's unprofessionalism. 'We should be able to figure out where it came from –'

As dramatically as Zeller had, Price lurches back from the body, the blood draining from his face.

'She has a heartbeat!'

'Pfft, what?' Zeller rolls his eyes and checks the woman's throat, pressing forefingers against her carotid artery.

'She's in rigor mortis!' Jack protests, glaring at them both. It's late on Monday evening, and he's in no mood for tricks…

'She doesn't have a pulse,' Zeller argues, and Jimmy presses his hand flat to the chest again, nearly *fainting* at the feel of it.

'She *has* a *heartbeat*,' he insists. Zeller waves him away, squaring his shoulders against all this nonsense, and presses his own hand to the chest.

'She doesn't –' He jerks back and looks at Jack. 'She has a heartbeat!'

Jack, as their Alpha and boss, pulls on a pair of his own gloves and approaches the dead woman, ready to prove or refute their claim. Both Betas withdraw, trembling faintly from the possibility that they might have begun cutting into a living person.

'*Something's* beating,' Jack says, frowning at them.

It doesn't take long for Zeller to cut open the traditional Y autopsy shape and drill through the breastbone. Jack and Jimmy stand back, their faces shielded behind plastic visors, and only lean in once he has cracked open the ribs with a spreader, exposing the heart. There's a moment, a twitch and then –

'Holy shit!'

Zeller ducks as a starling bursts free of the woman's chest, spraying blood everywhere. Like something out of a horror movie, the bird soars up to the metal rafters of the ceiling and shakes itself off, chirping its relief to be free of its cage of dead flesh. It stares down at the three men watching it warily, blissfully naïve of the strangeness of its appearance.

Jack lifts the visor from his face and wipes at the sweat on his brow, his pulse racing.

Hannibal's right. He needs Will.

***

'Addy, Buster! Come on!'

Will stands in the porch doorway, golden light spilling out into the blackness of the night as he waits for the last dogs to come in. It's late, and he's tired from spending the day reading

the mountain of legal paperwork he received this morning, transferring his guardianship and legal assets to Dr Hannibal Lecter. He's supposed to just sign them, and his life away with it, and be a good little Omega, but he has no intention of giving his cannibalistic mate anything more than the bare minimum, so he's hired a lawyer to help him navigate the proceedings, and decided to use his suddenly expansive free time to research Omegan liberation.

He's studiously avoided taking the home pregnancy test bought on a whim at the gas station on the way home. It sits, unopened, in his bathroom, a gnawing concern lurking beneath every clause he reads in his guardianship contract.

A dull buzzing catches his attention, more for the unexpectedness of it than the fact that someone might be calling him, and Will turns with a frown.

That's my work cell.

He's kept it charged out of habit, and because he's still waiting for a final verdict on his employment status as a teacher from the Director at Quantico, but he doubts he's getting an administrative call at ten minutes to midnight.

The caller ID reads: Crawford, Jack. Will's breath catches, and he almost doesn't answer.

Almost.

'Bit late for a social call, Jack,' he says, slotting the phone between shoulder and ear.

'Hey, Will. I hope I didn't wake you.'

The Alpha, at least, has the grace to sound awkward, as though just realizing the time, and acknowledging the fact that Will has no obligation to him anymore.

'No, I'm not in bed, yet,' Will says, snapping his fingers to Buster, who has decided to snuffle around the steps instead of getting into the warmth. 'What can I do for you?'

Jack sighs, and Will's heart sinks. He kicks the door shut behind his errant little terrier and turns the lock as the Alpha explains the case of the dead woman found *inside* a horse, and the bird found inside *her*.

Does it ever end?

Will sinks into an armchair, resting his head back with the phone propped on his shoulder, despair dragging at his limbs until he's so exhausted he thinks he could sleep for a month.

'We need your help,' Jack finishes, grim but resolute. 'I've obtained special clearance for you to accompany me to the crime scene. You won't be acting in any official FBI capacity, and you'll just be giving me a profile of the killer. Nothing more.'

Will huffs a bitter laugh and rubs his cheeks.

'Are you sure you should be taking an *Omega* to a crime scene, Jack?' he bites. 'Aren't we too *delicate* for that sort of thing?'

‘You’re the best we have,’ Jack says, a low growl rumbling in his words. ‘I know how you feel about the public’s perception of Omegas, Will. Are you going to let that stop you saving lives?’

Oh, you manipulative bastard…

Will pinches the bridge of his nose. He’s going to regret this.

‘Fine. Text me the address. I’ll be there in the morning.’

He hangs up and, for a long while, stares at the little silver cell phone, wondering what would happen if he were to throw it across the room and smash it into pieces against the far wall.

Eventually, when tiredness grits his eyes and makes his jaw crack with endless yawns, Will heaves himself from the chair and stumbles into bed. He’s returned the mattress to the bedframe, leaving the dog beds undisturbed before the space heater, though the covers are a tangled mess and there are a dozen extra pillows there now, adding comfort and security. It’s still a nest, just not as luxurious or impractical as the one he’d made when he’d first come home.

After brushing his teeth and stripping out of his clothes, Will curls up around one of the pillows, the blankets bunched up over and around his head. His peace-starved mind wanders to the paperwork on his desk, his life’s worth summarized into seventy-six pages of legal jargon, and he falls into a fitful slumber filled with nightmares of enwombed women, birds bursting free of dead hearts and his Alpha’s cruel, smirking face as he sells Winston and the others, ignoring Will’s cries as he struggles against the straitjacket and muzzle binding him.

He jerks awake at the shrill beep of his alarm, tacky with sweat and breathing hard. Jack-Dog and Winston crowd near the bed, pushing their wet noses at him as Will reaches for them with something like a sob, relief robbing him of his voice. He slides out of the tangled sheets and collapses onto the cold floor with the pack, his *family*, his splashing tears onto their coats as he kisses every one of their soft heads, reaffirming their presence by physical touches.

‘He wouldn’t,’ he whispers, rubbing Addy’s belly as she lies down next to him. ‘He *wouldn’t*…’

The paperwork on the desk catches his attention. Silent and still, it is somehow more terrifying than anything faced during his incarceration with Dr Chilton. More terrifying than the idea of being pregnant.

Hannibal could take *everything* from him.

His hands shaking and heart thundering, Will reaches up onto the bedside table and unplugs his cell from the charger. Opens up a new message to Hannibal and begins to type.

‘I need to see you. Today. Book an appointment for me.’

Despite the early hour, there’s barely a minute’s delay before the phone buzzes with Hannibal’s reply.

‘4.30pm.’

Tingles chase each other up and down his body, raising the fine hairs on his arms. Will rubs the prickles away, sitting with his knees tucked up to his knees, back to the bed and the dogs all around him, keeping his bare feet and legs warm with their soft bodies.

It’ll be fine. He’ll speak to Hannibal about the contract, get an agreement properly documented and, above all else, protect his family.

But, first, he has a killer to find. And a test to take.

***

Two lines means yes.

Will decides to wear his new coat to the stables, partly because he wants to indulge himself, and partly because then the fabric will absorb the stink of horse, and piss Hannibal off. He gets dressed after his shower in a thick shirt and dark jeans, and plucks the coat from the hanger in the closet, the silk-lined wool surprisingly warm and heavy against his shoulders as he buttons it with numb fingers.

I’m pregnant.

He stares at his reflection, winding the cashmere scarf around his neck and snuggling down into the sweet-smelling softness. It’s nothing like the scratchy wool of his other scarves, and Will rubs his chin against it, just to savor the feel against his skin. Buttery leather gloves hug his hands like a second skin, and he indulges himself for a moment, admiring the view.

I’d fuck me, he thinks, noting the sharpness of his shoulders and the subtle curve of his waist, accentuated by the cut of the fabric. Black boots complete the outfit, and he realizes, with a jolt, that he looks sophisticated. Dominant.

Pregnancy suits me.

Nausea bubbles up, triggered by fear, and Will pinches the bridge of his nose. Fuck… What the fuck is he doing? Playing dress-up with gifts from his psychopath?

Stomping out to the car, Will refuses to let himself look at himself again as he climbs behind the wheel and drives his trusty Volvo through the fresh flurries of snow to the stables. Jack meets him there, silent and hulking next to his black SUV, and hands him a paper file without saying anything.

Will needs to do this bit alone.

Bracing himself, he forces his legs towards the jagged shards of violence still hanging in the frozen air, pushing through razor strands to stride into the barn. Horses snicker, sensing his pain, but Will ignores them, pushing down his own discomfort because this is only the first part.

I can’t believe I did this all the time.

When he reaches the end of the row, outside the last stall where the resonances are the thickest, tainting the air with the putrid echo of death, Will stops and opens the folder.

High-definition photographs assault his eyes; details leaping out from the glossy pages. Burst capillaries in the woman's eyes. Broken fingers. Blood-smeared breasts and the slick coating of horse uterus still clinging to her hair.

Here… It happened here.

Will glances up, just to check that the stall he's sensing is the right one from the report. It is. Behind him, one of the horse snickers and Will takes a deep breath, smelling his own scent thicken. Deepen.

His dark shadow rises, excited by the lingering taste of pain. His heart thumps, low and steady, filling his insides with black smoke. The current swells, warming him from crest to toes, and Will's skin seems to press itself up against the silk of his coat, the silk inside his gloves and the softness of his scarf…

This is why Hannibal bought him this outfit; because it feels so good on his body as he lets his barriers down.

Air glides through his nostrils to fill his lungs. The river drags him under, whispering sweet nothings to him as he floats. Will closes his eyes, exhaling slowly, and lets the pendulum swing.

He's there.

It's very early. The horses are all blindfolded, a careful scarf wrapped over each of their gentle faces.

'I don't want you to see me,' Will murmurs, his chest *aching* with love for these animals. For all animals. 'I don't want you to see what I *do*. I want to calm you, comfort you… There's so much *comfort* in darkness…'

He remembers his own blindfold; the heavy weight of his body and the languid thud of his pulse as he floated in nothingness, secure in his Alpha's care.

Ice pierces his heart, and Will rubs the mare's neck after blindfolding her. She's suffering. Grieving for her lost foal. She won't survive the pain of it.

'… But not for one of you,' he finishes, reaching for the needle in his pocket.

It's over quickly. She doesn't suffer anymore. He fetches the body of the dead Beta woman, Sarah Craber. His Sarah. Sweet Sarah, who used to wave at him and smile. Who gave him a candy, once.

He's not strong, but he manages to carry her in his arms to the end stall. She's not been dead long, and her body is still malleable. He lays her down in the stall, smoothing a gloved hand over her shoulder. Through her hair.

An apology.

‘I took your life,’ he whispers, tugging at the red cloth covering the starling’s bird cage, grief swirling in his belly at everything that’s happened. ‘… And then tried to give it back to you.’

Cutting Sarah open is easy enough. He has experience in this. He places the bird *so* gently inside, careful not to hurt or scare it anymore than he has to. Cuts into the mare, the poor dead mare, and slips a hand into the steaming entrails.

‘I find the womb,’ Will mutters, speaking in his mind to confirm the actions he *knows* have happened. ‘And place you inside.’

It’s hard work, and he’s sweating, his muscles shaking by the time he’s finished. Rough stitches lace up the horse’s body again, and he wishes he could have done a better job but he can’t. His arms tremble as he tugs on the string used to seal his prize inside.

‘I hope that the forces of death and biology with bring you rebirth,’ he gasps, his hands slick with dead blood, his nose filled with the coppery smell of it and his eyes stinging with tears.

It’s not right. This should never have happened to you.

Will opens his eyes, slamming back into his own body, his own mind, stood outside the stall in the dull grey morning light.

‘It was a coffin birth,’ he says, speaking aloud because he knows Jack has come to find him. Jack always comes to find him.

The Alpha has his fedora pulled down low and his winter coat buttoned up, making him larger and more impenetrable than ever. When he slants a curious glance at Will, one eyebrow raised, the Omega tips his head to bare the side of his throat in submission and explains,

‘Decomposition builds up gasses inside the putrefying body, which force the dead fetus out of its mother’s corpse.’ Will shrugs. He’s seen it happen in dogs, before. ‘It’s really more of a prolapse than a birth.’

He frowns, considering the stall again. The intimate nature of the tableau, if it could even be called that…

‘Whoever did this knew the horse,’ he says, his throat catching around a low, distressed whine. ‘Knew she was dying, because her foal was born dead…’ Tears prick his eyes, quickly blinked away. ‘He knew Sarah Craber,’ he adds, and gives himself a moment to take a deep breath by looking around. ‘He was familiar with the stables; he knew when he wouldn’t get caught, so he works here, or maybe… maybe *used* to work here…’

An image of the needle comes again to mind, slipping right into the vein. The knife that cut so precisely to find the womb…

‘He has medical knowledge of animals, but he’s not a veterinarian,’ Will says, thinking of the rough stitches. Wishing he could do better. Wishing he could make it all just go away… ‘He

considers himself a healer.'

Jack growls, and glares from the stall to Will.

'How is *this* healing?' he demands, eyes flickering crimson at the suggestion. Will offers him a wry smile.

'Sarah Craber was *reborn*.' He shakes his head, the truth locking into place like a jigsaw piece. 'This wasn't murder, Jack. This was *grief*.'

***

It doesn't take Jack long to identify the likely suspect. A former employee, an un-claimed Omega under the guardianship of the state by the name of Peter Bernardone. Peter lives to the west of the yard, less than an hour's drive away, and Jack bundles Will into his SUV to take them both there together.

A feisty black horse whinnies the moment it sees the car, trotting over to greet them. Despite his somber mood and the reason for their visit, Will can't help but smile to see it, so friendly, and he steals a mint from Jack's car to feed as a treat.

Jack, unimpressed, strides off to the barn and thumps, hard, on the double doors. A flurry of barks, screeches, chirrups and meows assails them, rising like a wave at the intrusion, and Jack opens the door wide, entering the straw and feed-scented workshop ahead of Will, keeping his own Omegan charge tucked behind his right shoulder for protection.

The walls of the workshop are lined with cages and crates, each one filled with an animal. Dogs, cats, rabbits, some doves and an owl. There's even a monkey, baring sharp fangs as it screams a warning at the sudden disturbance.

Each one is in a different stage of recovery; some will never walk or fly again, and Will places a soothing hand on Jack's arm to slow his approach.

This is a sanctuary; a place of healing. He can feel it, and responds before the Alpha.

From further inside the workshop, a small voice calls out a similar admonition.

'You scare 'em when you knock like that.'

'Peter Bernardone?' Jack replies, and the other Omega flinches, ducking his head to show the slender column of his white throat, his eyes downcast and shoulders hunched. He moves stiffly, each motion a jerk on his muscles, as if there's a delay getting the order from his brain to his limbs. He paces, back and forth, back and forth, gold-ringed brown eyes darting about the dropping-strewn floor as if for help. 'Sir?' Jack repeats, drawing a deep blush from the Omega.

As they drive Peter into a corner of the room, Will realizes that he's fallen into a classic predator move with Jack; attack from each flank and cut off the escape. He moves slowly and precisely, holding himself coiled.

He doesn't feel like an Omega, right now. Not in the company of a real one.

Peter's scent is thick and sweet, filling the air even as little whimpers burble up from his throat. It's all designed to trigger Jack's Alpha instincts, to encourage him to calm and protect. To comfort.

Will sees Jack visibly try to resist the lure of his biology, his eyes burning red even as a low purr rattles from his own chest.

'You don't seem to be curious about who we are,' the Alpha says, trying to stay suspicious but sounding more curious.

Peter flinches again, as though reprimanded, and nods. He hums, building himself up to speak, and taps his right thigh as he asks, in a small, quavering voice,

'Who… who are you?'

'I'm Agent Jack Crawford with the FBI.' Jack gestures to Will. 'This is Will Graham.'

There's no job title or association there, and Will feels the loss. He lifts his eyes up and away, looking around the barn, at all the animals, all the *good* being done here, and his shadow stirs, flicking its snake tongue at the *wrongness* of their suspect.

It's not him, Jack.

He doesn't say anything for the moment. Just lets Jack do the talking, because it's his job, and takes in all the peripheral details. Dimly recognizes his own attempts to stay calm for the other Omega; to be a source of stability for him, and that Peter seems to be responding to it. The tremors of tension that had wracked him when they first walked in have reduced to shivers, now, and his half-heard mewls for help have sweetened in thanks.

'We're here to ask you some questions about someone you may have had contact with when you worked at the Blackbriar Stables.' Jack's eyes narrow at the fidget, trained to spot signs of suspicion. 'A woman named Sarah Craber?'

Peter lists away, tucking his head further towards his chin, a low whine escaping his lips.

'Her body was recently found in… unusual circumstances,' Jack adds, and Peter cringes, nodding and then shaking his head, his eyes screwed tight shut.

'I know, I know,' he mumbles, his gentle voice high and childlike, but still with the clear ringing quality of an Omega in his prime. 'I heard.'

Will speaks without looking at him; not wanting to influence the more submissive man.

'There was a bird in her chest, too. Did you hear about that?'

Another whine from Peter, followed by the hum of building his courage up to speak independently.

‘W-were the bird alive?’ he manages, and Jack raises an eyebrow at Will, who arches a look over his shoulder at the other Omega.

‘Yes,’ Will says, studying him closely as Peter nods and sags a little, stroking his own arms to soothe himself.

‘Who… er… who-who t-taking care of the… the bird?’ Peter asks, trying to look back at Will but getting his golden eyes stuck on Jack. As the only Alpha in the room, *and* a strong one with the first hint of rut adding a tang to his scent, he demands their attention, and only Will’s stubborn pride and bond to Hannibal keeps him from gazing like an idiot. Peter has no chance. Unbonded, it’s surprising he isn’t curling up in Jack’s arms, or at least turning to face him. Though showing him his back is a very submissive gesture, as well, especially with his head firmly bowed.

‘How well did you know Sarah Craber?’ Jack demands, prompting another series of nervous taps and fidgets from Peter.

‘I didn’know her,’ the Omega whispers, his words slurring into each other. ‘Didn’know her.’ He shakes his head, shuffling his feet as though searching for a way out.

‘Would you mind looking at a photograph?’ Jack asks, and Peter keens, quivering with distress at the idea of it. His scent sharpens with salty fear and even Will takes a step forwards, ready to get between them if he needs to.

‘I… I… I know who she is,’ Peter says quickly, almost gasping out the words. ‘I didn’t… didn’t *know* her…’

Jack pulls a small photograph from inside his coat anyway.

‘Well, why not just take a look… Just to be sure, hm?’

Another shudder, and a tear rolls down Peter’s cheek when he squeezes his eyes shut this time. Will almost growls, but he knows Jack too well by now to know it’ll help. His ruthlessness is part of what makes him such a good Agent.

His breath hitching, Peter curves his arm back and up behind him; an odd, broken gesture that Will recognizes, along with the vicious scar on the shaved side of the Omega’s head. He watches closely as the other man brings the picture in front of him and then opens his eyes, the blood draining from his face and sorrow twisting his lips to expel a whimper.

And then Peter closes his eyes again, turns his head away and then curves his arm back to return the photograph to Jack. Each movement individual.

‘Did you get your head injury working at the stables, Peter?’ Will asks, and the other Omega responds instantly to him, turning as much as he can and pointing up at his scalp.

‘Yeah, yeah, k-kicked by a h-horse… K-kicked by a horse… Boom.’

‘It’s an a-typical motor response,’ Will explains, speaking to Jack even as he draws closer to Peter. He stops with a stack of empty dog crates and a carrier with two white rabbits between

them. ‘Peter’s ability to look and touch can only happen at separate events.’

The smaller Omega nods, darting a tiny, grateful smile at him for helping.

Will’s expression hardens, his shadow dancing in his blue eyes.

‘It’s aggravated by stress, right?’

Peter swallows, his scent swirling with nerves again. At least the acrid stink of terror has gone, now that the photograph is away.

Jack clasps his hands before him, brown leather gloves creaking.

‘Are you feeling under stress?’ he asks dangerously.

‘Yeah, yeah… yeah, I’m worried about the’bird,’ Peter lies, nodding vigorously and repeating the same fidget-shuffle-tap as before. ‘Worried about the bird… worried about the bird. I’m *sad* for her-’

Will’s eyes lock onto Peter’s racing pulse, surprised he’d mention the victim, but a moment later it becomes clear as Peter continues,

‘S-sad for the… the h-*horse* but… but I can only help the bird.’ The Omega shrugs, plucking at the broken hem of his sweater, mumbling under his breath, ‘Only h-help the bird.’

Will turns to Jack, and then jerks his chin towards the door. That’s enough for today. Peter needs to rest.

‘Thank you, Peter,’ he says, talking firmly enough that both Alpha and Omega will respond to him. ‘That’s it for now.’

As Jack clenches his teeth at the command, Peter hums and manages a quiet purr, half-turning to Will again and nodding. Will tips his head a fraction closer, inviting confidence, and adds warmth he doesn’t feel to his voice as he adds,

‘Go and make yourself a hot drink. We’ll show ourselves out.’

Another nod. Another purr. Peter responds to care like an animal starved for affection.

Like an *Omega* starved for affection. Something twists in Will’s gut and he turns away with his eyes tingling gold, following closely behind Jack as the Alpha braces himself for the bitter cold of the outside once again.

Away from Peter’s sanctuary, the world seems too large and too harsh, a place of death and violence. The exposed skin on Will’s face hurts at a blast of icy air spits snow at him, but he refuses to let himself huddle down into his scarf, no matter how much he wants to drag up his own scent to comfort himself in Hannibal’s absence.

‘Well, he knew the victim,’ he says grimly. ‘He knew the animals involved.’

‘We’ll need a warrant,’ Jack replies, each word riding a cloud of warmth quickly snatched by the Virginian winter.

Will sighs, his own breath billowing for a moment longer. He still runs hot.

‘I don’t know if he’s the killer, Jack.’ He frowns, chewing his lip as he turns it over in his mind. ‘If he is, he never meant to be… And, if he *isn’t*…’ He waits until the Alpha glances back at him, and then raises an eyebrow. ‘Then he knows who *is*… Be gentle with him.’

***

Traffic and an accident on the interstate means that Will only just gets to Hannibal’s office for 4.30pm. He hurries inside to find his Alpha waiting in the office doorway for him, a worried crease smoothing from his brow to be replaced by a long look up and down, followed by a wide smile.

‘Hello, Will,’ Hannibal purrs, taking in the beauty of his mate, dressed impeccably in the Omegan coat, scarf and gloves that he bought for him. ‘It’s good to see you.’

‘It’s not a social call,’ Will snaps, hating the way he blushes at the praise, at the *joy* he feels slithering through his bond. He thrusts the large envelope at the other man and strides past him into the office. ‘My lawyer advised me to check my guardianship contract with you before I sign over all my father’s worldly goods.’

Including his only son.

If Hannibal is surprised by either the contract or Will having a lawyer to potentially contest it, he hides it from his face. Will jerks his gloves off in short, angry motions and tosses them onto the couch in front of the two windows, quickly followed by the scarf and then the coat.

Hannibal shuts his office door, giving them privacy for their discussion, and slides two slim fingers inside the envelope to pluck out the papers. He reads the first two pages quickly, dark eyes scanning the small writing before rising to meet Will’s. What he sees in his mate’s expression is an erotic mix of fear, defiance and resignation. He longs for there to be hope buried somewhere in Will’s stormy eyes, but he knows better than to look for that, yet.

‘Would you like a drink?’ he asks, placing the contract and its envelope on his desk. Sees Will falter, sweating gently in the warm office, his skin still holding the cold from outside, clearly not expecting the question.

‘No. Thank you.’ The gratitude is grudging, and Will clears his throat afterwards, looking away as he rolls up the sleeves of his blue shirt.

Hannibal crosses to his armchair, sinking into the leather and draping one long leg over the other, his hands clasped at the knee. After a moment’s pause, Will joins him in the opposite seat, frowning slightly.

‘What are we –?’

‘Tell me what you saw, when you visited the stables this morning,’ Hannibal says, maroon eyes locked onto his Omega’s face, cataloguing the tightness of his jaw, the tip of his chin and the whiteness of his knuckles on the armrests.

Will bites off a scoff, chewing his tongue as he looks away from Hannibal to the contract sitting, like a prized hostage, on the desk. He didn’t come here to discuss the case, but he needs to… Needs to draw the pus from his wound and cleanse himself of it… Hannibal can sense it, and Will *knows* he won’t discuss the legalities of their relationship until this is dealt with, first.

‘I saw grief,’ he sighs, reaching up to rub between his eyes. ‘A desperate attempt by a frightened man to *undo* what had been done to someone special to him. I saw the thinking behind it; the reason *why* he did what he did…’

‘You were able to reconstruct this killer’s fantasies,’ Hannibal says, his tone warm with pride. ‘One dead creature giving birth to another. The bird; his victim’s new beating heart. Her soul given wings.’

‘Rebirths can only ever be symbolic,’ Will replies, his gaze distant as he fixes it on a point of light on the floor. He hadn’t realized until now how very *tired* he is. Is it always like this? After a crime scene? After courting death?

‘You’ve been reborn,’ Hannibal says, offering him a tiny, dark smile when his Omega’s gold-ringed eyes flick up to his and lock them together.

‘Wasn’t that the *goal* of my therapy?’ Will drawls, laying his cards on the table. To his surprise, Hannibal doesn’t take advantage of it. He considers Will for a moment and then sidesteps the point with another question.

‘How does it feel, consulting again with Jack Crawford and the FBI? Last time it nearly destroyed you.’

‘*Last* time, *you* nearly destroyed me,’ Will says, his growling voice slow and steady. He doesn’t want Hannibal to use any excuse to mistake what he means.

The Alpha looks down, feigning sorrow.

‘After everything that has happened, Will, you still believe –’

‘Stop right there.’

Will’s voice is like a whip-crack, but he holds himself relaxed and sat back in the chair, his hand dangling, wrist loose and pulse barely elevated. He’s not angry with Hannibal for trying to slide out of the accusation; it’s in his nature. But he won’t permit it.

He smirks at his mate, his eyes like chips of ice.

‘*You* may have to pretend, but *I* don’t.’

Hannibal pauses, surprised by Will's reaction. A moment later, his mouth curves into a grin that makes his eyes crinkle, and he purrs, just once.

'No. You don't. Not with me.'

You never have to pretend with me, Will.

Since they're being so *honest* with each other, now, Will continues,

'I don't expect you to *admit* anything; you *can't*…' Another sigh, this one shaky as he reins in his emotions again. 'But I prefer sins of *omission* to outright lies, Dr Lecter.'

Will holds Hannibal's gaze, feeling like he's being flayed alive under the obsidian gleam, and he growls, long and low, his hackles rising and eyes shining gold as his shadow lashes its tail in fury.

'*Don't* lie to me.'

Another grin, boyish this time. It's all a game to him.

'Will you return the courtesy?' Hannibal asks, genuinely curious. He sees Will pause, sees him consider the question, and then the answer in the set of his shoulders. He nods. 'Why have you resumed your therapy? Why not just ask me to Court you?'

Will huffs, and rolls his eyes at the naivety of the question.

'I can't just talk to any psychiatrist about what's kicking around my head,' he says, and something in the words, the dark, sinuous tone, has Hannibal repressing a shiver of longing.

'You fantasize about killing me,' he murmurs, burgundy warming to crimson as Will swallows, gaze full of bitter hatred as he whispers,

'*Yes*.'

Hannibal wets his lips, just the barest flash of his tongue between sharp fangs, and he watches a tremor run down Will's spine. His Omega's scent is smoky, thick with his darkness, his hunger, but there's no salty fear, only a growing sweetness hinting at pleasure.

Despite his reservations, Will is enjoying himself.

'Tell me,' Hannibal says, keeping his tone light to draw his mate deeper into the game. 'How would you do it?'

'With my hands,' Will breathes, his pupils widening at the imagined feel of Hannibal's throat under his palms, the Alpha's fluttering pulse slowing beneath his fingers… His blood, copper-sharp and burning hot across his face as he bites down…

Hannibal grins at the wave of pheromones rolling from his half-hard Omega, watching Will squirm in his seat as the first syrupy taste of slick hits the air. He knows *exactly* how intoxicating it is to plan a kill.

‘Then we haven’t moved past apologies and forgiveness, have we?’ he croons, satisfaction curling out like a warm flame as Will graces him with a tight, thin-lipped smile. A hunter’s smile.

‘We’ve moved past a lot of things,’ the Omega says, his breath shaking. He pauses, reigning in his errant emotions, and rubs his fingertips together as he continues, ‘I discovered a *truth* about myself when I tried to have you killed.’

Hannibal drops his chin, eyes glinting.

‘That doing bad things to bad people makes you feel good?’

The same offer he’d extended to Margot. A direct comparison between the Omegas. But, where Margot had hesitated, Will swallows again, fighting down a desperate whine of longing.

‘Yes.’

Hannibal’s gaze sharpens, a warning masking his underlying concern, betrayed by the salty hint of fear in his scent.

‘I need to know if you’re going to try to kill me again, Will.’

He knows better than to trust his mate, just yet.

Will mimics his Alpha’s earlier gesture; flicking the tip of his tongue over his lower lip as he mulls over the question. Making Hannibal wait.

When he smiles, it has the same cold, sharp quality of a shark.

‘I don’t wanna kill you, anymore, Dr Lecter,’ he replies, his eyes glinting like chips of blue ice. ‘Not now that I *finally* find you interesting.’

I want to know how you think you can Court me. I want to make you vulnerable, and hurt you like you hurt me.

Hannibal’s heart skips a beat and his breath catches. The memory of their first day together, their protein scramble breakfast in the dingy motel room – his initial attempt to Court the wary Omega – hangs like smoke between them. His lips curve into a slow, self-satisfied smile, and Will raises an eyebrow in silent response, Hannibal’s promise lingering like a lover’s caress.

I don’t find you that interesting.

You will.

‘I always keep my promises,’ Hannibal murmurs, dropping his gaze to his lap for a moment, to give Will a reprieve. Very quietly, as though Will is trying hard to repress it, he hears a shaky breath, and glances up just in time to see the Omega’s eyes flood gold.

‘Do you?’ Will murmurs, tilting his head a fraction. ‘You promised to save me.’

And I always will, Hannibal thinks, regarding Will quietly. Aloud, he merely replies,

‘Would you like to discuss the contract, now?’

His chest tightening with nerves at the idea of signing the document, signing his *freedom* away, Will rubs tingling palms on his knees, and forces himself to nod.

‘Yeah, we should.’ He shoves himself up onto numb legs and hurries to get the paperwork, surprised when he doesn’t leave sweaty fingermarks on the manila envelope. He passes it to Hannibal, who withdraws it to resume reading where he left off, leaving Will to either stand and stare helplessly at the top of his blond head, or return to his seat to wait.

Will chooses neither; he wanders over to the drinks cabinet, scowling at the whiskey he can no longer drink before settling on fresh water and pouring them each a large glass. He sets Hannibal’s tumbler beside the Alpha on his way back to his armchair, sipping as he waits for the other man to finish checking over the document.

‘This is a very thorough contract, Will,’ Hannibal finally says, glancing up from the page. ‘I’d love to meet your lawyer.’

‘Yeah, she’s good,’ Will murmurs, taking another drink. ‘She’s one of the Co-Founders of the Omegan Liberation Movement.’

‘This includes an annulment clause?’ Hannibal asks, glancing at Will to clarify as he reads, ‘”In the event of the paired Alpha’s death, incapacitation or the dissolution of the bond, all legal guardianship of William Graham will return to his father, William Graham Snr, and release William Graham from all ties to Dr Hannibal Wilhelm Lecter with immediate effect.”’

‘Only seems fair,’ Will says coolly, lifting one shoulder in a small shrug. ‘Objections?’

‘None,’ Hannibal replies. If it surprises him, Will doesn’t show it. ‘However, I would like to request an alteration to the inheritance.’

‘I don’t want anything from you,’ Will says, scowling at him. ‘I specifically requested no inheritance.’

‘Not for you; in the event we have children,’ Hannibal explains, and Will falls silent, chewing his lower lip. Hannibal returns his attention to the contract, and reads, ‘“In the event of the paired Alpha’s death, incapacitation or the dissolution of the bond, guardianship of all children shall remain with the Omega, William Graham, to be financially supported by Dr Hannibal Wilhelm Lecter at his discretion.”’ Hannibal looks up. ‘This contract excuses me from all parental responsibilities, Will. Was it intentional?’

‘Yes,’ Will admits, looking away before meeting Hannibal’s eyes again. ‘If anything happens, I don’t want to owe you anything, or have our child owe you anything.’

‘Would you allow me to set aside a fund in my own living will?’ Hannibal asks, making a note of something on the pad of paper kept by his chair. Will’s belly squirms with nerves and he tries not to look too interested in what his mate is doing.

‘A fund?’

‘A small sum of money, to be paid into an account of your choosing upon the birth of our child, followed by a monthly stipend.’

‘You’re not insisting on visitations?’ Will asks, his brow furrowing. Hannibal offers him a wry smile, and tilts his head.

‘This is hypothetical, of course,’ he murmurs, holding the contract lightly, as though it is contaminated. ‘I have every intention of *sharing* my future with you, Will. Any child that we have will know both parents, and be cherished by us each in turn.’

‘But just in case,’ Will pushes, prompting a sigh and a nod from Hannibal.

‘In the event of my incapacitation or an annulment of our bond, I would relinquish all rights to the child. I would know them only with your permission.’

‘Done,’ Will says quickly, and Hannibal nods. He sets the contract aside, satisfied with the changes, and clasps his hands over his knee, regarding his mate calmly.

‘Well, now that those legalities are taken care of –’

‘I’m going,’ Will mutters, pushing up from the chair. ‘I just came for the contract.’ He holds his hand out, beckoning for the papers, half-expecting Hannibal to refuse to give them to him. His Alpha, however, merely gives him a long look, eyes half-lidded and dark, and hands the contract back to him, envelope and all, careful not to touch Will’s hand with his own.

‘I’ll have my lawyer contact yours,’ Hannibal says, forcing himself to stay in his seat as Will moves to collect his scarf, gloves and coat. ‘We can make the necessary changes and sign it together. It should be finalized by the end of the week.’

Will nods, not trusting himself to speak. His throat feels too tight for words, and he doesn’t want to reveal the extent of his nerves with a whine or a whimper. He shrugs into his coat, buttoning it with sharp, jerky movements, and wraps his scarf around his neck, ready to face the outside once more.

Hannibal remains silent, watching his proud, stubborn mate clamp down on his instincts and defy the social expectation of an Omega. His heart swells with pride at Will’s strength, and he releases a single, ringing purr into the room just before the door closes behind the other man.

In the relative safety of the waiting room, Will allows himself to sag against the office door as Hannibal’s purr slides like liquid fire down his spine to warm him from the inside. He clutches the contract to his chest, and presses his forefinger and thumb into his eyes until a kaleidoscope of colors explode across his vision. Hannibal’s easy acceptance of the contract

clauses and Will's specific instructions regarding ongoing ownership and care of the dogs had surprised him. No, not surprised him, which was the surprise.

He'd been surprised by how well he knew his Alpha. How much he still trusted him, even after everything.

Will huffs a laugh, sick at his own naivety, and hurries down to the car, eager to be home and away from the cloying, confusing scent of his mate. Hannibal's taste lingers on the envelope, and he indulges himself a final impulse; lifting the manila to his mouth one last time before starting the engine, his lips curling into a rueful smile as the smell of his mate settles across his tongue, soothing him.

If he wasn't a cannibalistic murderer, Hannibal Lecter really would be the ideal mate…

If he wasn't a murderer.

***

Jack calls him in the middle of dinner. Will scowls at his work cell, spearing another chunk of broccoli and stuffing it all into his mouth before answering.

'I'm busy,' he says, voice muffled by vegetable.

'We found the gravesite,' Jack says, not bothering with preamble. 'You got a pen and paper?'

Will sighs, debating whether the argument is worth it. He wedges the phone between his shoulder and chin, and reaches for one of his notebooks, unclipping the pen from the spine.

'I'm ready.'

Two and a half hours later, Will parks up at the edge of the scene and steps out into a bitterly cold night. At ten minutes to eleven it's pitch black, darkness pushing against the edges of the lamps and car headlights keeping the scene sharply illuminated.

Hunching down into his coat, Will tucks the cashmere scarf a little higher up under his jaw, protecting his sensitive skin against the razor shards of violence lingering in the frosty air. Before approaching the fluttering yellow tape – *I remember that tape being around my house* – he pushes a woolen hat down over his curls and slides his glasses onto his face.

Bodies are already being bagged and taken away on coroner's stretchers. Some remain next to their graves, their skin mottled with decay, fingernails long as the cuticles pull back and hair matted with clumps of earth.

Jimmy Price and Brian Zeller are already here, crouched over one of the graves, bundled up in thick coats, gloves and hats. Their team of forensic officers work around them, collecting samples and brushing the bodies down for any evidence that might be lost or contaminated during transit.

Seeing Will stood in the middle of the field of death, arms loose by his side, shoulders braced in his sleek coat, Zeller feels a pang of guilt. He hasn't spoken to the Omega since the arrest,

but he knows that Jimmy had messaged him, and even sent him an update about Beverly and Saul's cat, which he adopted after their deaths. He trudges over to the smaller man, his gut churning with nerves as he clears his throat.

'Will…?'

Gazing around at the empty graves, Will's ears crackle with static, but there's a lingering warmth that he hadn't noticed when he'd first arrived. His shadow wells up, purring Hannibal's purr, proud of itself as it recognizes the echo. Fire licks up his spine, tickling across the back of his neck, making his crest tingle, just like before.

An Alpha did this.

Clenching his jaw at being ignored by the Omega, Zeller tries again. Will has every right to be angry with him.

'I owe you an apology,' he says, his voice rough. He expects a derisive snort, even a growl, but the Omega barely reacts.

'You don't owe me anything,' Will says. He can hear how flat his voice is, how cold, but he's too swept up in the current, in the crowing pride of the Alpha responsible for these murders, to be in control of it.

You showed me this, to scare and impress me… It's a sick Courtship.

'I thought you were a killer,' Zeller insists, trying not to get frustrated by how aloof the Omega is. Will's never been normal, after all. 'I didn't wanna hear anything else, so I wouldn't consider anything else.'

Dragging himself away from the Alpha's lingering presence, Will turns his head to look back over his shoulder at him, feeling his eyes prickle as they flood gold.

'The evidence was… *compelling*.'

Zeller shakes his head, refusing to accept the out.

'It didn't stop Beverly from questioning it.' The Beta's voice trembles as Will turns to him, but he forces himself to continue, to admit the *truth* of the matter. To admit *his* part in her death. 'Maybe, if she thought we've listened, she would have come to us. She didn't.'

He offers Will his hand, such a fragile olive branch. His fingers, inside their thin blue latex, must be freezing.

Will knows they'll never be friends, but he has no intention of spitting on the offering, and he grips Zeller tight, shaking with him to accept his apology and draw a line in the sand.

Jack stomps over to them, fedora hat low on his head, hands shoved deep into his coat pockets.

‘We traced the soil we found in Sarah Craber’s throat to this vicinity,’ he explains. ‘The methane probes did the rest.’ He nods over to one of the holes. ‘We found her empty grave, and fifteen others that are *not* so empty.’

Will nods, golden eyes flicking over the corpses.

‘If Peter Bernardone knew about Sarah Craber’s grave, he knew about all the others.’ He glances over his shoulder, watching the conflicting emotions on Jack’s face. Anger, frustration, confusion. He’s struggling to believe that Peter, an *Omega*, could do something like this.

‘Let me talk to him again, Jack,’ Will says, dropping his voice just a little and adding an Omegan rasp to it. He tilts his head a fraction, offering the Alpha a glimpse of his jaw, the hint of a throat, and hums out a pleading whine. ‘I can get what we need from him.’

Zeller’s eyebrows rise in disbelief as Jack, their headstrong and stubborn boss, folds like a house of cards under the Omega’s manipulation. His jaw almost drops open when Jack huffs and nods, granting permission for Will to visit Peter again, alone, before he seeks a warrant, and then turns to the smaller man when Jack turns and strides away to bark orders at the other FBI agents.

‘Man, I wish *I* could do that,’ he grumbles, clapping Will’s upper arm. ‘My life would be *so* much easier!’

Will holds himself still under the unwanted touch, his gaze sliding away from Zeller’s retreating back as the Beta returns to his analysis. He thinks about the pending contract, his legal guardianship – *ownership* – passing to Dr Lecter. Thinks of Miriam Lass, under the custody of Jack Crawford. Thinks of his job at Quantico, almost certainly terminated now that his status as the lesser, weaker, *gentler* caste has been revealed…

He’ll never officially work in law enforcement again, unless the law changes. He’ll never be emancipated and free to live the same life, with the same rights and liberties as his Beta or Alpha counterparts…

But, yeah, he can manipulate his biology to sometimes get his way with an Alpha.

Life as an Omega is so *much easier.*

***

‘Mason likes burning me,’ Margot says, her voice flat and lifeless. ‘It started when we were children. He would light matches and put them out on my stomach. Or tie me up and put thin candles between my toes to make me dance. He branded my nape once, just to see if it would heal.’ She arches a curved brow. ‘It did.’

Hannibal sighs, and settles back into his armchair, smoothing away a crease from his suit pants. The more he hears of Mason Verger, the more he wants to kill him.

‘Every human being is capable of committing acts of great cruelty,’ he says, looking back over his shoulder to where Margot is stood, wary in his presence, clinging to her sling like a lifeline, dressed in another sharp suit and a high-necked crimson silk blouse. Layers upon layers to hide herself away from his scrutiny. ‘Your brother dehumanized you,’ he continues. ‘And your family, unfortunately, fosters that climate of disrespect.’

They are not worthy of you.

‘*They* think I’m weird,’ Margot says, rolling her eyes. Hannibal smiles at her language, the youthful innocence of it, and inclines his head.

‘I’m *much* weirder than you will ever be, Margot,’ he promises. Another smile. ‘It’s fine to be weird.’

The Omega considers him for a moment, weighing the words. Her plump red lips part and she exhales softly, irises flickering bright, unbonded gold as her emotions get the better of her.

‘They’ve already forgiven him,’ she says, aiming for cool disinterest, betrayed only by her eyes. ‘Talk shows and self-help books; they thrive on this sort of thing.’ Her heels clack on the wooden floorboards, her pinched face turned away from Hannibal’s placid gaze. ‘Everybody loves a sinner redeemed.’

Margot sits, each movement neat and precise, effortlessly elegant in a way on an Omega can be.

‘The prodigal son, set about repairing his ways,’ she finishes, voice deepening with a suppressed growl that, to Hannibal’s ear, adds a delightful huskiness to her timbre. ‘He may have made bad choices before, but how he can make new, *better* choices.’

Sitting across from her, dressed today in a brown plaid suit, white shirt and lavender silk tie, Hannibal regards Margot curiously.

‘Do you believe that?’

Margot huffs, her good hand tightening into a fist on her lap.

‘Do you believe *me?’* she snaps.

‘It’s not my role to believe you, Margot.’ Hannibal speaks softly and calmly. Unemotional in the face of his patient’s stress. ‘It’s my role to help you understand what you believe.’

‘*I* believe my brother won’t *stop*,’ Margot says, eerily clear and precise. The truth, borne of decades of abuse at the hands of a jealous Beta.

Hannibal sighs again. Such a waste.

‘How does that make you feel?’

Margot lifts wet eyes to the ceiling, shrugging her unbroken shoulder.

‘Angry?’

She sighs, sounding worn down. As though anger is pointless. Hannibal frowns, feeling his eyes flicker crimson. He wants to change that.

‘Anger is an energizing emotion,’ he explains. ‘It prompts action against threat. If you’re *angry*, you’re optimistic you can stop this from happening again.’

‘Oh, I know how to *stop* it,’ Margot snarls. She sits back in the chair, crossing one long leg over the other and draping her hand over the armrest, glaring with golden eyes over at the window, refusing to meet Dr Lecter’s gaze.

Hannibal feels a flicker of warmth in his chest; the same pride he’d felt when Abigail defended herself against Nicholas Boyle. The same pride he feels towards Will, and their unborn child.

Such potential.

‘If you really want to kill your brother, Margot, wait until you can get away with it.’ He speaks plainly, his dark eyes never once leaving her face. ‘Or find someone to do it for you.’

He sees the surprise flicker in the depths of her gaze, sees the recognition and consideration of his suggestion. And then, very slowly, fueled by impotent rage, he sees acceptance.

Margot Verger is going to kill her brother.

***

Will returns, alone, to see Peter Bernardone on Wednesday afternoon. He unwinds his scarf and unbuttons his coat, but he keeps it on because the space that Peter uses for his office is colder than the rest of the warehouse, the space heaters reserved for the animals.

Setting the cage down on the table between them, Will sits in the cracked leather chair offered to him and gestures to the starling inside.

‘You said you were worried about the bird,’ he explains. ‘Thought you might like to see it.’

The other Omega sits in a hunched, timid position, knees tightly locked, hands twisting in his lap. He bows his head, baring the side of his throat even to Will, and his eyes swirl gold with every nervous flick up to his face. Wearing a thick plaid shirt and waistcoat, he reminds Will of himself.

A more *Omegan* version of himself.

Humming softly, Peter gathers up the courage to speak.

‘B-but… isn’t it… isn’t he in… in e-evidence?’ he asks, his brow furrowing in worry. Worry that Will is going to be in trouble for him.

Wills huffs a laugh.

‘I’m not FBI,’ he replies, knocking his fist on his left knee. Two, three taps. There’s a humming acknowledgement from Peter, honeyed eyes settling on his jaw and mouth as Will continues, ‘I used to sort of be, but now I’m *really* not.’ A bitter smile. ‘They don’t allow *Omegas* in law enforcement.’

‘You… you h-hid?’ Peter asks, surprising Will enough that he nods before realizing what he’s confessing to.

Another hum. Another nod from Peter. Almost like he understands the act of hiding. Of pretending to be a Beta.

After a moment, Peter tries again.

‘I… I d-didn’t… didn’t k-kill… didn’t k-*kill* anyone… I…’

‘I *know* that,’ Will promises. ‘But…’ There’s a growl rasping his throat as he sighs. ‘It’s not always *relevant*.’

Peter gulps back a whimper, clutching at his own jeans for support. For comfort.

‘They found Sarah Craber’s grave,’ Will says softly, dipping his head to catch Peter’s eye. Another sigh, this one weary. ‘How’d you find it?’

He thinks he knows, but he wants Peter to say it. The Omega, however, screws up his face and tilts closer to the bird, instead, listening intently to its chirruping. He nods, purring softly, and flashes a grin at Will.

‘She… she’s already s-speaking to me,’ he whispers, ducking his head as though expecting a reprimand. Will, however, smiles back, blue-gold eyes drifting over the oil-slick wings of the bird.

‘This one’s spoken to you before,’ he murmurs, earning a soft, guilty hum from Peter. Sitting forwards, Will is comforted to see that Peter doesn’t flinch away from him, allowing the distance to close between them. If he wanted to, Will could reach out and grab Peter. Touch him. Instead, he angles his body towards the bird, leaning into the cage to admire the starling. When he speaks again, he keeps his voice gentle, so as not to frighten or overwhelm the animal. ‘At some point, almost *every* society believed that birds carried our souls to the afterlife.’

‘You… you think I think… this… this bird is… is S-Sarah?’ Peter asks, croaking out another whimper before sniffing it back. ‘She’s gone.’

Will keeps very quiet, just watching the light play across the blue-black feathers of the starling, waiting for the other Omega to continue.

‘She… she’s everywhere and nowhere,’ Peter whispers, gulping as tears run down his hollowed cheeks. ‘She…’ He catches himself, biting his lower lip and keening.

‘Tell me who killed her,’ Will says, very softly, still without looking up. From the corner of his eye, he sees Peter shudder, sees him stamp his foot and pound a weak fist onto his knee,

his eyes glowing gold.

‘I just wanted s-something *beautiful* for her,’ Peter gasps, shaking his head.

‘You were *grieving* her,’ Will replies, explaining the emotions to the other man. Emotions he’d *felt*, so strongly, during the reconstruction. Sorrow. Regret. Guilt. ‘You couldn’t save her, but you *could* bring poetry to her death.’

‘I wanted you to find me,’ Peter mumbles, scratching up at his throat, now, reaching for the nape of his neck. ‘I wanted you to find me ‘cos if you could find me you could… you could… you could find… h-*him*…’

Him?

Will’s looking at Peter’s face, now. At his hand, reaching for his neck. A neck that should, by all rights, be unblemished. Unbonded.

Sickness twists his stomach.

‘Do you have a *shadow*, Peter?’ he whispers, watching the way the other Omega squirms, blushing at admitting his secret. ‘Someone only you can see?’

Peter whines, shivers wracking his tiny body, now.

‘Someone you considered a *mate,*’ Will continues, his own dark shadow rising up, adding a thick, smoky tang to his scent. ‘An Alpha, who made you feel… less *alone*?’ His heart beat very fast now, and Will swallows back his own grief as he hears Peter’s breathing falter with tears. ‘Until you saw what he really is.’

A killer. A monster.

‘N-no-one…. *No-one* will believe me,’ Peter sobs, rocking back and forth on his stool, hugging himself in a desperate bid to calm down. ‘He’ll make *sure* no-one will believe me.’

Will growls, focusing Peter’s attention on himself.

‘*I’ll* make sure they *do*.’

***

After Peter admits the name of the killer, his Alpha, his *social worker*, Will calls Jack. He presses a steaming mug of cocoa into Peter’s hands, urging him to drink it, and passes over the details so Clark Ingram can be called in for questioning.

Then, Will calls Hannibal.

His Alpha answers on the second ring.

‘Hello, Will. Is everything alright?’

‘Jack’s going to call an Alpha in for questioning on the dead horse case,’ Will says, pitching his voice low so it doesn’t carry back to Peter. ‘I think he’s bonded the Omega we’ve been speaking to. I’m going to check.’

‘It would be best if Alana were to question your suspect,’ Hannibal replies. ‘As a Beta, her presence would be less abrasive to the Alpha, and might encourage him to open up to her.’

‘Jack wants you there, too,’ Will says, pinching the bridge of his nose. ‘And me… So we can check out the story.’

‘Of course.’ Hannibal rises from his desk, moving to fetch his coat. ‘I’ll meet you there.’

Will hangs up and slides his cell back into his pocket. He turns, wiping tingling palms on his coat before heading back towards the other Omega. Peter has set his cocoa aside, more interested in the bird than the drink. His golden eyes are alight with wonder as he watches the starling hop about the sawdust floor of its cage, chirping and blinking its bright black eyes.

‘When did it start?’ Will asks, coming to stand just behind and off to the side of the smaller man. He sees Peter flinch, ducking his head, and tries to catch a glimpse of the crest on the back of his neck. Peter’s collar is too high.

‘W-what start?’ Peter mumbles, trembling fingers reaching for the bird. His comfort.

‘There’s an interesting loophole in the law regarding the ethics of Alphas holding positions of social power over Omegas,’ Will says, deliberately turning away and inspecting the cages of rats, mice and hamsters along the wall. ‘If you and I were Betas, the Alphas would be obligated to retain professional boundaries between themselves and us.’ He tosses a wry smile over his shoulder to Peter, who has gone very still, listening intently. ‘But because of what we are, they think they can do what they want, with no consequences.’

‘They… they *can*,’ Peter manages, reaching up for his neck again.

Will hums, turning a slow circle, giving Peter space for a moment. Only a moment.

‘Did he Court you?’ he asks quietly, looking down in time to see Peter cringe, abandoning his nape. Will nods, swallowing the bitter taste in his mouth. ‘Didn’t think so. When did it happen? Was it one night, maybe when you’d spent a long day together, or was it right at the start? When he first took on your case?’

‘I… I… I d-don’t…’

‘I know he bit you, Peter.’ Will comes to stand in front of the other Omega, looking down with cold eyes, his mouth a hard line. ‘I know he mounted you, and forced a bond on you.’

Peter shivers again, cowering down under the taller man’s anger.

‘He triggered a Heat, didn’t he?’ Will continues, reaching out to squeeze Peter’s shoulder. A single source of comfort. A lifeline. ‘But he wouldn’t let you bite him back.’

‘W-what?’ Peter squints up at him, reaching up to grip Will’s hand in both of his own. ‘B-bite him b-*back?* N-*no*… No… O-Om-megas don’t b-bite.’

‘Actually, we do,’ Will says, nodding when Peter shakes his head again. ‘It’s called a Pair Bond, and it makes the Alpha just as vulnerable as us.’ He sighs. ‘But it’s rare. Most Alphas don’t like it. It’s not widely known about, and it can be hard to do.’

Peter falls silent, his gaze distant as he absorbs what Will has told him. Will gives him a few minutes, knowing it will take at least an hour to inform Clark Ingram, Adult Social Worker, that he is wanted by the FBI for an interview. Eventually, though, he knows he has to go.

He settles Peter back in the warehouse, giving him custody of the bird, and promises to return as soon as he can. He doesn’t offer a warning to the Omega; he doesn’t need to. Peter has been with Clark to the gravesite. The Alpha has peacocked for him enough to prove how dangerous he is.

‘Remember what I said, about the Pair Bond,’ Will murmurs, touching a thumb and forefinger to Peter’s throat, right over the windpipe. ‘You bite here, as soon as you can.’

‘W-won’t that k-kill him?’ Peter asks, glancing up and then away, stroking his throat after Will lets go. ‘If I b-bite him?’

Unfortunately, no, Will thinks. Aloud, he replies,

‘There’s a gland. It’ll form a crest of its own, a thin scar beneath the skin. If you bite him, he’ll be yours.’

Peter walks with him to the doors of the shed, and touches Will’s elbow as he buttons up his coat, ready to leave. Will pauses, and glances down at him.

‘Have… have you… you… b-bitten your A-Alpha?’ Peter asks, gazing up at Will with something like awe.

‘No.’ Will shakes his head, and Peter chews his lip in confusion.

‘Do… do you w-want to?’

Do I?

Will sighs, his breath already billowing in the cold air.

‘I don’t know,’ he admits, tugging on the new leather gloves Hannibal bought for him. ‘I don’t think I have a choice. I think I just have to.’

It’s the only thing that will keep him from hurting me again.

***

Clark Ingram is a snake. His blue eyes are dead; cold chips of ice set into a boy-next-door face. Neatly combed brown hair, typical Alpha build. Broad shoulders and lean muscles. He

could be anybody's neighbor.

Watching him sit down opposite Alana in the interview, safe behind the two-way glass, Will shivers as a lump of ice slides down his spine.

There's something very, very wrong with that man.

'Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, Mr Ingram,' Alana says, offering him her hand to shake.

Clark refuses it.

Unperturbed, Alana settles in her chair, her back to the mirror, and opens up her notebook. She also has Peter's case file in front of her, and watches as Clark's dead eyes flit to the pages. To the photograph of the Omega he forcibly bonded.

'You've been a Social Worker for what, six, nearly seven years now?' The Beta's voice is deliberately light and casual. General curiosity, not suspicion. 'You must love your job. Your caseload is substantial.'

'Every Social Worker enjoys certain aspects of the job more than others,' Clark replies, offering her a genial smile. It would work, if it weren't for the lack of emotion behind it. 'There are… cases that you reach and…' He sighs delicately, as though upset. 'Cases you don't reach.'

Alana accepts this with a small, neutral nod.

'Your notes on Peter Bernardone's file are… *drastically* different than the ones from his last case worker,' she says. The first line in the pond.

'Well, the social services system is far from perfect,' Clark says, still smiling genially. If it wasn't already creepy, it would be by now. 'It's common to omit certain information on difficult cases in order to clear a path in the world for those stuck in the weeds.'

Another small, neutral nod from Alana. She can feel her emerald sweater sticking to the sweat on her back, and she wonders if Clark can smell her discomfort. His Alpha senses would be highly attuned to that, after all.

'Peter's not a *typical* Omega,' Clark continues. 'He's has persistent cognitive problems. Confusion, paranoia. Rage.' He shakes his head sadly. 'I would have refused his case, had I known.'

'You don't seem to feel *sorry* for your client,' Alana says, deliberately avoiding the word "mate", noting the faint flicker of crimson in Clark's eyes at the omission. She smiles, her own blue eyes steely. 'A surprising lack of *empathy* in a Social Worker.'

And in a bonded Alpha.

Clark looks up, another gentle smile stretching his mouth. He hides his fangs, but Alana can see the tension rippling through him.

‘Peter Bernardone has accused me of killing sixteen women,’ the Alpha says. A statement of fact, rather than an explanation. Mr Ingram slithers around the truth like fat on a hot griddle.

‘How does that make you feel?’ Alana asks, using a gentle, encouraging tone.

Clark considers the question, turning it over behind his shark eyes. He sighs politely.

‘Right now, I’m feeling *inconvenienced*. I’m being detained on the word of one very *damaged* individual.’

‘You’re not being detained,’ Alana says, offering him a cold smile of her own. ‘You’re being interviewed. The FBI is just being thorough.’

She makes a note of something on her paper, and the air suddenly thickens with salty tension.

‘What are you writing down?’ Clark asks, his voice rasping with a barely suppressed growl. Alana glances up, hiding her satisfaction at such an obvious reaction.

‘An observation,’ she replies, watching a muscle jump in Clark’s jaw.

‘About me?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Alana says, smiling kindly. ‘I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable.’ She leans forward over the table and reaches out to give his hands a quick, comforting squeeze.

Clark recoils, sliding his arms down by his sides so she can’t touch him again.

‘That’s smart,’ Will mutters, watching the Beta at work. ‘She keeps pushing him on his *feelings*, not on the facts. She’s trying to gauge how comfortable he is with emotion. If he *has* any. He couldn’t bear being touched by her.’

He glances at Jack, stood on the other side of Hannibal, but it is his own Alpha who responds.

‘Yes, his responses are typical of psychopaths during interviews.’ Hannibal glances at Will. ‘But it could also be resentment.’

Will frowns, and shakes his head as he glares back at the glass.

‘No. His eyes are dead.’ He feels his irises itch, turning gold as he thinks of Peter, of the vulnerable Omega under this man’s care. ‘He’s a predator.’

Back inside the interview room, Alana decides to poke Ingram again.

‘Did you know Sarah Craber?’ she asks, and, predictably, Clark shakes his head.

‘No. Peter talked about her extensively, though.’ He seems to realize how this sounds, and quickly adds, ‘During our house visits. I’d say he was obsessed with her.’

‘Do you think Peter Bernardone is capable of murder?’

At Alana's question, Clark stiffens. A typical Alpha response to a perceived threat against his mate.

'I'm not a psychiatrist, Dr Bloom,' he replies, his tone decidedly cold.

Alana makes another note on her paper, and Clark's irises flash crimson.

'I'm curious, Mr Ingram.' Alana looks up, settling her weight back in the chair as she regards the Alpha. 'Why did you become a Social Worker?'

Clark thinks for a moment, and then, like a badly scripted robot, replies,

'Society needs caring people.'

Inside the viewing booth, Will grits his teeth to keep from snarling, seeing his eyes glowing like amber in the reflection. Through the microphones, he hears Alana's response.

'It also needs a few psychopaths. To keep the rest of us on our toes.'

Giving him permission to agree. To slip. He won't. He's too smart for that.

Clark is quiet for a moment, and then, very suddenly, he sits forwards. Clasps his hands on the steel interview table and smiles his dead, predator's smile.

'There's no evidence I did this,' he says. 'And if you'd like to know how I *feel…?*' He shakes his head. 'I feel like I don't wanna be here anymore. So, if you're not *detaining* me, I'd like to be on my way now.'

Alana smiles, dropping her gaze to her notebook. She can't make the decision, after all, and she waits for the buzz of the intercom, for Jack's voice to sound through the speaker.

'Let him go.'

His heart battering against the inside of his ribcage, Will turns to his former boss.

'You're making a mistake, Jack.'

'I've *got* nothing to hold him on,' Jack replies, turning to him with a frustrated shrug. Will clenches his hands into shaking fists at his sides, every muscle screaming at the unfairness of it all. His darkness swells, desperate to spill out and destroy the Alpha getting ready to leave the interview room.

'Peter Bernardone is biologically disadvantaged,' he growls. 'He's been manipulated.' He stabs a hand towards the glass, barely able to keep from thumping it. 'As an Alpha, *and* his Social Worker, this man is in a position of trust and he has betrayed that trust. He *bonded* him, Jack!'

Jack merely sighs, his hands deep in the pockets of his suit pants. There's nothing he can do. He's confined by the law.

Will swallows back the lump in his throat, his gut twisting with fury that bubbles like lava through his veins.

‘I know what it’s like to point at a killer and have no-one listen.’

Beside him, Hannibal holds very still, fully aware that Will is referring to him. That he is sharing their fractured relationship with Jack, to embarrass him.

Jack, however, simply scowls at Will.

‘You pointed in the wrong direction,’ he replies, turning and leaving the room.

Alone with his Omega, Hannibal sighs.

‘Will –’

‘Don’t,’ Will snaps. He hugs his elbows, bowing his head and blinking away tears. ‘I promised I’d make people believe him,’ he whispers, his voice thick. ‘He doesn’t have *anyone* on his side.’

‘He has you,’ Hannibal says, drawing closer and very carefully easing Will into his embrace. Will rests his forehead against his Alpha’s chest, trembling against the maelstrom of emotions battering his insides, breathing deep the comforting scent of sweet and heavy musk, and Hannibal’s cedarwood cologne.

‘Clark Ingram is guilty,’ Will says, thinking more clearly now that the buzzing anxiety has been soothed from his mind. He relaxes into Hannibal’s touch, sliding his arms around the other man’s waist and folding himself into the hug, using the comfort to *think*. To plan. ‘He’ll go after Peter for this. He’ll punish him.’

‘Do you think he’ll hurt him?’ Hannibal asks, and Will glances up, catching the same thought.

If we catch Clark hurting Peter, it can be used as evidence against him.

As soon as the hope flares, it dies out. Will huffs, and shakes his head.

‘He won’t risk getting caught,’ he says softly, burrowing back into Hannibal’s chest.

Hannibal hums his agreement, content to savor their closeness. He rubs up and down his mate’s back, tracing the notches of his spine beneath the seafoam green cotton shirt and delicate skin, fascinated by Will’s intense *need* to protect an Omega he barely knows.

‘We’ll go and check on Peter this evening,’ he murmurs, smiling down at him when Will frowns up in confusion. ‘You intended to return, didn’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Will admits, annoyed by his own reluctance to step away. He forces himself to put some distance between them, and reaches behind him for his coat. ‘I want to be there when Clark shows up.’

‘We’ll be there together,’ Hannibal says, turning to watch as Alana shows Mr Ingram from the interview room. ‘We’ll face him together.’

***

Returning from a run to the store for more pet food, Peter walks into the warehouse to something very, very wrong.

The cages are all empty, the doors hanging open.

His Alpha’s scent hangs thick and heavy in air, bitter with rage.

Peter runs to the first cage, peering inside to see if Tabby, his rescued ferret, is there.

Gone.

Same with the rabbits, and Sebastien the monkey, and Rufus the boxer… They’re all missing. But they’re not well. They’re not well enough to be missing. They won’t survive out there on their own. They need to be healed.

Maybe… Maybe they’re in the barn. Maybe Clark just moved them… Maybe…

The world shakes around him, and Peter whimpers. He can feel his eyes pulse gold, his crest throbbing as it swells to press up against the back of his shirt. He can’t… er, he can’t… He can’t *move* if he’s looking around.

Peter closes his eyes, trying to control his breathing, gulping back his calls of distress. He taps his thigh, reminding himself that he can move, and then turns, following his Alpha’s scent out of the back of the warehouse and into the livestock barn.

‘No… no, no, no…’

It’s even worse in here. The air is ripe with the smell of coppery blood.

Chickens scatter as Peter lurches forwards, his legs tingling as shock robs him of his strength. He can see the beautiful legs and flowing mane of his horse, the horse that he saved from being shot after it kicked him in the head… His beautiful mare, his lovely girl…

But she’s stiff, now. Dead and cold and lying on her side, her skull smashed open and drooling brains over the floorboards.

Peter crashes to his knees beside her, sobbing and keening as he tangles his fingers in her fur, his tears falling to mingle with the red stains all around him. It’s all gone… It’s all gone… Everything he’s ever wanted. Everything he worked for… All gone, because Clark is angry with him… Because he betrayed his Alpha…

He doesn’t hear the footsteps, doesn’t smell the new scent over the metallic stink. When Clark speaks, it makes him jump.

‘What have you done, Peter?’

Clark stares down at his Omega, his own eyes pulsing red, his expression calm even as he grips a hammer tight in one fist. This pathetic, mewling *maggot* could have ruined *everything*. Brought him to the attention of the FB-fucking-I, after everything he's *done* for him.

He needs to suffer.

'I'm worried about you,' he continues, his voice rasping as he fights back a snarl. 'You've been expressing a lot of rage, recently.'

He can see Peter's confusion, see the brows furrow above his gold, childlike eyes. But Peter won't argue him. He can't. Clark may as well have collared him, thanks to their little "training" sessions.

He sighs.

'So often in my line of work, I see people take out their resentments on those closest to them.' He watches Peter snivel over the dead horse, and he *likes* it. 'It's a sad fact of human nature… And Omegas are prone to extremes of emotion. The way you *think* is compromised by your biology. You're destroying your life, because you're fighting your bond to me. You're not *built* to be alone.'

Clark sighs again, shaking his head sadly.

'Sarah was a bitter reminder of everything you'll never have. And *this* is the very horse that kicked you in the head.'

'She… she d-didn't m-*mean* to,' Peter sobs, still rubbing and stroking the dead mare's neck. 'She was just… just *scared*.'

'Some will say this was a long time coming,' Clark says, shrugging. 'I know I will. I already have.' Another long-suffering sigh. These situations are always so much more difficult for the Alpha. 'Sixteen women, Peter. You killed them. Because you weren't worthy of them.'

'No,' Peter moans, his face shining and gold eyes burning from hollowed sockets. He glares up at his Alpha, his mate, and bares his small fangs. '*You* k-killed 'em. *You* killed 'em!'

Clark smiles at him, gentle and forgiving. His dangerous smile; the one that makes Peter shiver with cold.

'If *I'd* killed them,' his Alpha says, almost *purring* now. 'It would be because they *were* worthy of *me*.'

Just as you're worthy of me.

Peter knows what's coming next. What has to come next. But he doesn't want to die. He doesn't want Clark to kill him.

His gaze drops to the hammer in the Alpha's hands. The hammer already slick with blood, from cracking open the mare's head.

The world shakes, and Peter knows what he has to do.

***

It seems like everyone is set to keep him from getting to Peter that evening. First, Hannibal insists on taking him to the cafeteria for a drink – orange juice instead of his much-needed coffee. Then, on their way to the parking lot, Will finds himself being hailed by the secretary for the Director of Human Resources, summoned to the man's office for an impromptu meeting.

He checks his watch, deciding to risk it, and they both ride the elevator up to the fifth floor. Hannibal settles in the waiting area as Will knocks and lets himself into the Director's office.

Ted Numan is an old-school Alpha, silver haired and with a grandfatherly smile, but steel eyes that speak of ingrained prejudices. His secretaries are all Beta women, and his senior managers are all Alpha males. He's rumored to have two Omegan mates at home, and a brood of children.

He stands when Will enters, and moves to hold the door open for him, frowning in mild annoyance when Will walks in, unaided.

'Here,' he says, pulling out a chair for him. 'Is your Alpha joining us?'

'No,' Will says, unbuttoning his coat.

Numan goes to the door, anyway, and asks Hannibal the same question, accepting *his* answer with a nod.

When he returns to his desk, he sits with a sigh and straightens out his tie.

'Now, I understand we've had some difficulties with you, Mr Graham –' he begins, but Will holds up a hand to stop him.

'Call me Will. I'm actually running late for another appointment, so would you mind just telling me if I have my job back or not? I assume not, from the distinct lack of a reply to my messages.'

Director Numan looks scandalized, adjusting his suit jacket and fiddling with the papers on his desk. His dark eyes flicker over Will's face, searching for the usual traces of Omegan meekness, his frown deepening when he doesn't find it.

'*Will*. Yes, well… I'm sure you're aware of the investigation that's taken place during your absence.' He waits for Will's nod, which he barely receives, before continuing. 'The board has very thoroughly reviewed your case. And quite a case it *was,* let me assure you.'

Numan chuckles, but Will is in no mood to indulge him his bigotry, and remains stony-faced. The Alpha clears his throat.

'Obviously, there are a number of factors that we need to take into consideration when making this kind of decision. Qualifications and experience, role competencies, legal status…

All sorts of things.'

All sorts of things.

It's clear from his tone of voice that he doesn't expect Will to understand.

Will holds Numan's gaze steadily, but his heart is beating just a little faster than before. Black tar oozes through his veins, and all he can think about is the fucking contract on its way to his lawyer's office, to be amended and re-issued, signed and sealed and securing his ownership in the hands of Dr Hannibal Lecter.

Legal status.

'As I'm sure your Alpha has explained to you, Article 62 of the US Congressional Law prohibits Omegas from working in fields such as law enforcement, for your own protection,' the Director says, speaking quickly now as though to halt any irrational objections he may encounter. 'That means that you applied for a teaching role using a false identity, that of a Beta male, and obtained counterfeit paperwork to continue your employment.' Numan gives him a stern look. The sort of frown a headmaster might give to an errant school child. 'That being *said*,' he continues, 'the board is aware of your past, and that you served to the best of your ability in the New Orleans homicide department. It's clear to us all that you were coerced into your situation here at Quantico, which we've taken into account when making our decision.'

And here it comes, Will thinks, clenching his fists on his lap as Numan heaves another sigh.

'I'm sorry, Mr Graham, but the board has ruled you unfit to return to work. We've discussed it at length, and I've advocated for you to be retired early. You'll receive your pension, through a registered account of your Alpha's choosing, and we'll provide you with a good reference if you're permitted to return to a more appropriate teaching position in the future.'

If I'm permitted…

Will rubs his hands up and down his thighs. He feels sick. It's one thing *knowing* what to expect, but *hearing* it…

He jerks to his feet, wondering if he's swaying.

'Is that all?' he mutters, already turning away. Numan stands again, blustering out some sort of well-wishes for the future, and Will reaches the frosted glass door in three strides.

Behind him, the older man hums a genial laugh.

'It's probably for the best, eh? With a handsome Alpha like yours, you'll be wanting to start a family soon, no doubt.'

Will grinds his back teeth together so hard his ears ring. He yanks the door open and stalks out into the corridor, heading for the elevator without waiting for Hannibal.

His Alpha is quick to follow, though he remains wisely quiet all the way down to the car. He only speaks to say that he'll drive, and Will simply nods, not trusting himself with words, just yet.

If he opens his mouth, he might just start screaming.

They ride in thickening silence out towards Peter's workshop, the snow falling heavily around them, blanketing them in a world of white. Hannibal plays choir music, the angelic voices a soothing balm to the brittle tension radiating from his Omega. He can imagine how Will feels; frustrated at his own situation, his career demolished in a matter of minutes, desperate to hunt and kill Clark Ingram, and worried about his fellow Omega. Resentful of Hannibal's presence, or, perhaps, resentful of his *appreciation* for Hannibal's presence.

After an hour, Hannibal judges it time to break the quiet. He takes his eyes from the road, from the skeletal trees craning over the embankments of the road, and glances at the hunched, trembling figure of his mate in the passenger seat.

'You look like a man who has suffered an irrevocable loss.'

Exhaling through his nose, Will forces his jaw to unlock enough to reply,

'I'm trying to *prevent* one.'

'Do you think if you save Peter Bernardone, you can save yourself?' Hannibal asks, turning his attention back to the road.

'Save myself from *what,* Dr Lecter?' Will's tone is sharp, and he arches an eyebrow at his Alpha as he speaks.

'From who you perceive me to be,' Hannibal replies, and Will sniffs a laugh, his mouth twisting into a bitter smile.

'I'm afraid I need to be saved from who *you* perceive *me* to be,' he says.

'Many troublesome behaviors strike when you are uncertain of yourself,' Hannibal warns, shrugging a little at the comparison between the Omegas. 'Peter Bernardone lies in the same darkness that holds you.'

'No…' Will shakes his head, his stormy eyes fixed on the road unfolding before them. 'I'm alone in that darkness.'

'You're not alone, Will.' Hannibal's tone is warm, honeyed silk with an underlying purr, and he sees the reflection of his Omega's eyes as they flash gold with pleasure. 'I'm standing right beside you.'

I'm always beside you.

***

The warehouse and barns are in darkness when they arrive. Hannibal pulls up near the workshop and cuts the engine, following quickly when Will rushes from the Bentley at the sight of Clark's SUV.

Will goes to the warehouse first, looking around at the empty cages and missing animals, his skin crawling at the acrid stench of Alpha Rut lingering in the air.

You enjoyed yourself.

Behind him, Hannibal observes the scene curiously, raising his eyebrows at his mate when Will suddenly whines and runs back the way he's come.

No… no, no, no…

Will sprints for the barn, following the jagged spikes of fear and sadistic glee from Peter and Clark. He bursts through the door, startling the other Omega; the other Omega who is crouched by the bloated, swollen belly of a dead horse, slick with blood up to his elbows, sewing up the torn flesh.

Will flinches, glancing back at Hannibal for support, an instinctive reaction that he hates himself for but can't stop. Hannibal closes the door behind them, sealing them inside, safe from prying eyes, and turns away to give Will his space, his independence.

You can do this.

When Will swallows, he tastes blood in the air. There's so much of it; it seeps across the floorboards, staining the straw pink, coating the hammer by Peter's thigh where he kneels between the hooves of the horse.

The smaller Omega is shivering, his shoulders bowed and hands busy pulling at the thread.

'Peter…?' Will speaks softly, wary of startling the other man, but he has to ask. He has to know. '… Is your Social Worker *in* that horse?'

Three steps behind his mate, Hannibal pulls up short, blinking from Will to Peter and then to the horse.

Fuck.

'… Yes.'

Peter winces up at Will, still holding the needle with his free hand. He whimpers, another tear trickling down his cheeks, the salt water cutting a path through the red.

'I used to… to have a horrible f-fear of… of *hurting* anything… but… he… he helped me… get over that.'

I'll bet he did, Will thinks, and Peter makes the strangled, keening sound he feels his body want to make.

‘It feels so *abnormal*,’ the other Omega gasps, his breath hitching around another sob.

Hannibal releases a single, low purr, watching as Peter visibly calms under his influence.

‘An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior,’ the Alpha assures him. Peter hesitates, trying to glance up at them but unable to meet their faces.

‘If think… I think he deserves to die,’ he croaks, licking at his lips. Will tastes salt on his own, and realizes he’s crying at the sight of such destruction. A man’s life, thrown away for the games of one cruel Alpha.

‘But…’ He swallows, trying to get his voice under control. ‘But you didn’t deserve to kill him, Peter.’

Sinking to a crouch behind the other man, Will wraps an arm around Peter’s fragile shoulders, the other on his elbow, ready to guide him up. He feels Hannibal move to the side, offering support without crowding them, without taking over, and his crest tingles at the rush of gratitude towards his mate.

For a psychopathic murderer, he can be really sensitive.

‘I want you to come with me,’ Will murmurs, applying pressure to Peter to encourage him to follow. He nods and manages a small, tight-lipped smile when Peter looks at him in confusion, and braces himself, taking the weight when the other Omega staggers and stumbles, slipping in the entrails on the floor. Hannibal is there, too, offering a stronger, steadier hand, and then Will turns them and leads Peter back towards the office adjoining the barn to the workshop, leaving his Alpha behind.

Alone with Will in the room of empty cages, Peter lets fresh tears fall, mewling at the sight of all his missing animals. He grabs for the crest on the back of his neck, scratching at it and tugging, trying to pull it off.

Will can imagine the skin cracking and peeling away, flaking off to reveal a virgin smooth nape once more.

‘What was done to you,’ he says, speaking quietly to hide the growl from his voice. ‘Was cruelty for cruelty’s sake.’

Peter nods, dropping his gloved hands to his sides. He leans back against a beam, his eyes unfocused as he tries to process everything that’s happened to him.

‘I think… I think I… h-*hate* him,’ he manages, and the simple conviction of it is like a knife between Will’s ribs. He feels a flutter in his belly, and his heart stutters.

‘I *envy* you your hate,’ he whispers. ‘It makes it easier when you know how to feel.’

Peter’s dark brows draw together, creasing his forehead as he narrows his eyes at Will’s words. He shifts, chewing his lip.

‘W-what… makes what easier?’

Will meets his gaze, feeling his shadow rear up behind his pupils. Black fire licks along his veins, spilling out with every thud of his pulse until he's an inferno of pure, dark, promise.

'Killing them.'

Peter sways, huffing out a laugh of relief. His eyes flood gold, and his cheeks flush a sweet pink.

'I… I didn't *kill* him,' he says. Another frown, his lip disappearing between small Omegan fangs again as he tries to explain it. 'I just… just wanted him to… to understand what it's like to… to *suffocate*. And to… to experience the… the destiny that he created.'

As quickly as it had risen within him, panic strips Will of his fire. His warmth.

Clark Ingram is still alive, and he's alone in the barn with his Alpha.

Hannibal.

***

Fingers slip out from between coarse stitching. Flesh pulses, stretching away from knuckles. A fist, followed by an arm, and then a head.

With a hoarse, choking grunt, Clark Ingram bursts from inside the dead horse. Entrails spill over the straw-covered floor, and he sucks in a shuddering, desperate lungful of air. He's dripping with blood, plastered with mucus and fast on his way to Rut, his eyes blazing like hellfire in his crimson face.

Hannibal turns from fussing a particularly affectionate lamb, his eyebrows drawing up towards his hairline as the evening gets *that* bit more interesting.

He watches, quietly unnoticed, as Clark vomits up a mouthful of innards, renting the air with a snarl. The blood-slick Alpha dives for the hammer, snatching it up and spinning around, baring his fangs at Hannibal when he sees him.

'Mr Ingram.' Hannibal's tone is light, and he stands casually, both hands in his trouser pockets. He smiles pleasantly at the poor excuse for a predator before him. 'Might want to crawl back in there if you know what's good for you.'

Clark looks set to argue with him, until Hannibal tilts his head and steps to the side, just as his fierce, beautiful Omega comes up from behind with his gun raised. His belly tightens at the gloriously smoky scent of Will's fury, his primal *need* to kill the man before him, and he takes the opportunity to gaze at Will as his mate approaches. Will is breathtakingly handsome like this, *glowing* with danger, every part of him focused on Clark Ingram.

Sensing the threat before him, Clark is quick to tamp down on his Rut. He drops the hammer with a clatter and raises both hands, sinking to his knees on the filthy floor.

'Officer,' he gasps, panting with fear as Will closes the distance between them. '*I'm* the victim here.'

‘I’m not an officer,’ Will replies, glaring with golden eyes down the barrel of his gun. His father’s old revolver, since he no longer has his FBI-issued firearm. ‘I’m Peter’s friend.’

‘Peter’s confused,’ Clark snaps, barely able to keep from rolling his eyes at the Omegan theatrics. There’s a flicker of satisfaction, Alpha pride swelling as Will pauses, considering his words. The gun lowers a fraction, just a dip, and then –

‘*I’m* not.’

Will takes fresh aim, and Hannibal looks from him to Clark and back again. He’s… nervous. Tingling with anticipation, because he doesn’t know what Will is going to do.

‘Pick up the hammer,’ Will whispers, nodding to the weapon by Clark’s knee.

‘Will,’ Hannibal murmurs, and the Omega growls. He steps even closer to Clark and cocks the gun, pointing it right at the Alpha’s forehead.

‘Pick. It. *Up*.’

Wheezing now, Clark shudders as Will takes aim. Hannibal peers into his mate’s face, moving into his peripheral.

‘It won’t feel the same, Will.’ He speaks with quiet urgency. ‘It won’t feel like killing me.’

‘It doesn’t *have* to,’ Will snarls, his arm shaking now. Hannibal can see that it’s taking *everything* to keep from pulling the trigger.

But if Will does this, he’ll truly be guilty of murder. And Hannibal can’t protect him from that. He can’t shield him from the fallout.

‘You did the best anyone could do for Peter,’ he says, his irises warming to maroon as he pours all of his love for his mate into his voice. ‘Don’t do this for him…’ A pause, and then the truth. ‘If you’re going to do this, Will, you have to do it for yourself.’

You have to be at peace with your decision.

‘P-please don’t!’ Clark chokes, and Hannibal frowns at him, his own shadow swelling in outrage at the interruption.

‘You would be wise to remain silent, Mr Ingram,’ he warns, quickly returning his attention back to his Omega. After all, he is the only one who matters. ‘Will,’ he whispers, his dark eyes boring into Will’s face. ‘This is not the reckoning you promised yourself.’

Will’s world narrows to the sound of his breath, whistling in and out, faster and faster, his heart tripping with excitement and blood roaring in anticipation. Hannibal’s words flow over and around him, but they can’t reach him here. He can feel his finger tightening, *itching* to pull the trigger, to *end* it, once and for all…

He parts his lips, tasting Clark’s salty fear, his surrender, and it’s intoxicating.

Now.

Hannibal senses the moment when Will tips. He grabs the muzzle of the gun, taking control of the situation, denying him the shot, and Clark heaves a sobbing gasp of relief, sagging in a puddle of his own making.

Tugging the revolver from his Omega's resisting fingers, Hannibal rubs the pad of his thumb over Will's inner wrist to calm him as he removes the weapon. Clark is a mess on the floor, no harm to anyone now, and Hannibal needs to get his mate home. To soothe him. Bring him back from this ledge and make him feel *safe*.

Expectation of the kill is as good a high as murder itself.

'With all my knowledge and intrusion,' Hannibal murmurs, pocketing the gun and wrapping a hand around the back of Will's head to knead the nape of his neck. 'I could never *entirely* predict you.'

He purrs, a deep and rattling sound of pride.

'I can feed the caterpillar… I can whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatches…?' Hannibal smiles when Will lifts tear-stained eyes to his. 'Follows its own nature and is beyond me.'

I love you. My mate. My equal. My Omega.

Shiizakana

Chapter Summary

Jack wants Will's help in identifying the culprit of a series of brutal murders, in which the victims have literally been torn apart. Will, however, is preoccupied with Hannibal's continued Courtship of him, including the third stage of the Alpha-Omega Hunt – the Fight.

Chapter Notes

Peeps. I am SO, so very sorry that this has been so long in the making. I hope it is good enough to be worth the wait, because, once I got back into it (and, to be honest, writing in general), I really enjoyed it.

Super excited to just crack on now and get more of the story out there.

Thank you so much for your patience! You're all amazing! xxx

NINE

Shiizakana

It's late by the time they leave.

Peter Bernardone is arrested for the murders of Sarah Craber and fifteen other women, and the attempted murder of his Alpha, Clark Ingram. FBI officers take him in a secure ambulance to the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, where he will be assessed and either incarcerated in one of their wards, or transferred to another mental hospital of his Alpha's choosing.

His life is over.

Will huddles in the passenger seat of Hannibal's Bentley, sick with anger and *aching* with grief. He remembers his own psychological assessment all too well; the standardized tests, the patronizing comments…

Hannibal still has his gun. It's probably a good thing; Will doesn't trust himself not to fire it at Clark's smug face, right in front of all the officers. The Alpha is sitting on the back step of

his own ambulance, wrapped in a fleecy blanket, the blood and horse entrails washed off his face and hands, giving a statement. About how he came to see his Omega, his *disturbed* and *angry* Omega, and was hit over the head with a claw hammer by Peter. Knocked unconscious and sewn into the belly of a dead mare.

Will's mouth still tastes bitter from his own part in securing Peter's conviction. He hadn't been here to witness Clark releasing the animals, or killing the horse. All he had seen, all he could *truthfully* say, when asked, was that he'd arrived to find Peter sewing up the belly, and that the other Omega had confessed to putting his Alpha inside the mare.

He glances up when Hannibal returns, his gold-ringed eyes dropping to the pocket of the other man's coat, where the gun sits, waiting to be used.

'How do you feel?' Hannibal asks, settling himself behind the wheel and starting the engine. He glances at his mate, noting the tension in Will's jaw but his heart warming at the way Will's hand lingers near his stomach, subconsciously protecting the unborn child slumbering inside.

Will sighs, and looks away. He glares out at the dark, snow-covered fields, staring until his eyes sting and blur. When he blinks, he realizes he can see his face reflected back in the cold glass, his irises bright in the gloom.

And, very faintly, behind him, he can see Hannibal.

You're not alone, Will. I'm standing right beside you.

'Tired,' he whispers, fumbling behind him to link his fingers with his Alpha's. 'Take me home.'

Hannibal nods, knowing that Will can see it, and gives his hand a quick squeeze before releasing it to put the car into gear. He turns the volume down on his music, allowing himself the background noise but giving Will enough quiet to process his emotions.

Take me home.

Hannibal knows better than to think Will might mean the Baltimore townhouse, and he turns off the interstate to take the country roads out to Wolf Trap.

The drive takes just over two hours. Will is a coiled spring on the right-hand side of the car the entire ride, and Hannibal feels a sympathetic twinge in his own shoulders. He's relieved when tires crunch on freshly fallen snow, and they rumble up the long driveway to the little farmhouse, its bright lights a welcoming beacon in the oppressive darkness.

Will releases a sigh when he sees it, and cranes his neck to make out the wicker chairs on the porch, suddenly illuminated when the lamp senses the motion of their arrival and flicks on, bathing the front yard in a yellow glow.

He's *safe*, here.

Hannibal parks in the dented ground where Will's Volvo normally sits – the battered old car is still in the parking lot at Quantico – but he leaves the engine idling and his seatbelt buckled. He doesn't want to presume that his presence will be welcomed or even tolerated by the Omega.

Will swallows, turning over his options in his mind. He could get out, now, and Hannibal would drive back to Baltimore. Would probably come and get him in the morning and taxi him to headquarters to collect his car…

Or he could invite him in, and see what happens. See how he feels, having his Alpha in his house again.

'Will…'

When Hannibal speaks, Will realizes he's lapsed into silent brooding, a deep furrow forming between his dark eyebrows. He wets his lips, and unbuckles himself before kicking open the Bentley door.

'You can stay the night,' he says shortly, already stomping through the snow to get to the dogs, who are barking and whining at the front door.

Grinning like an idiot, Hannibal cuts the engine and hurries after his mate, in such high spirits that he willingly crouches to greet the dogs – *is the small one called Buzz?* – and allows them to shed fur all over his coat. The sight of Will hugging each one, accepting sloppy licks and ruffling their shaggy necks, sends a peculiar swoop through his gut, and he straightens slowly, his heart fluttering and palms tingling.

You're going to be such a good father…

Will glances up, startled to find Hannibal staring at him so intently. There's a hunger to his Alpha's dark eyes, a possessiveness that should scare him, but it is tempered by such fierce devotion that the overall effect leaves him burning hot and blushing.

He really does love me.

He doesn't really know what to do with his knowledge. Hannibal is still a killer, still a monster. Still cheating on him with Alana, just to manipulate them all. But he's different, now. A little softer around him. A little more vulnerable, with each passing day.

I could really hurt you.

'What I wouldn't give to know what you were thinking,' Hannibal murmurs, stepping closer and reaching out to cup Will's pink cheek, rubbing the pad of his thumb over his Omega's stubbled jaw before he can think to stop himself.

Will tilts his face into the caress, holding Hannibal's gaze. Very deliberately, he turns his mouth to kiss his Alpha's palm, scenting him before releasing a gentle purr.

'Will…' Hannibal's breath falters and his eyes flicker red. He dips down, forgetting himself in the smoky, sugary sweet smell and creamy gold sight of his mate, and, for just a moment,

he thinks Will is going to reject him. But then Will hums, and welcomes the kiss, folding himself against Hannibal's chest and tucking himself up into his Alpha's embrace, selfishly seeking the comfort offered.

Lips brush against lips. They share breath, sliding tongues across each other, rasping against teeth and nipping plump flesh as the air grows damp between them. Will moans, swallowing the taste of Hannibal's mouth, starving for more of his spit, and he reaches up to grab each side of Hannibal's face, deepening the kiss as his body ignites. Lightning crackles through his veins, and he suddenly finds himself hyper-aware of everything around them. The milling dogs brushing against his legs, the bitter night air against his face, the warmth leaking from the open front door behind him…

'Cm'here,' he mumbles, pushing the words against Hannibal's lips as he walks backwards, leading the Alpha into the house with him. Hannibal comes easily, strong hands slotting over Will's hips to settle near his waist, one slipping around to rub the small of his back.

Will breaks the kiss for just long enough to check that all the dogs are safely inside with them and then shoves Hannibal up against the door, using the same movement to both slam it shut and pin his Alpha.

Hannibal loses his breath at the impact, and he feels his irises prickle a brighter crimson. He grins again, eagerly dipping to reclaim Will's mouth, even as his own is plundered. Tangles his fingers in Will's curls, massaging his scalp and down to his neck, brushing daringly close to his crest before sliding back up and away.

Will wants to feel Hannibal inside him, *now*. He doesn't want to think about his emotional response to the man, or worry about their relationship… Just for a while. Sex, at least, is simple. Sex is just physical. It's just bodies coming together to experience pleasure and sensations, and finding release.

It doesn't have to be emotional. He doesn't *want* it to be emotional…

'Fuck me,' he whispers, tilting his face up to nibble along Hannibal's jaw, laving his tongue across the hollow of his throat before sucking at the salty skin over his thundering pulse. He moans softly, pressing himself impossibly closer to his Alpha, frustrated at the distance between them.

Hannibal's hips buck at the plea, half-hard from just the kiss and eager for more. Will's roving hands scorch him in their wake, leaving behind an intricate map of his Omega's affection. He pushes at Will's coat, shoving it from his shoulders and down his arms, folding himself around the smaller man to kiss the newly exposed neck as he drapes the garment over the armchair on their way to the bed.

'Lie down,' he murmurs, pushing Will towards the mattress. Will sits first, golden eyes seeking out Hannibal's as his hands reach for him, unwilling to be parted for long, but Hannibal presses a hand to Will's chest, encouraging obedience, and stands between his Omega's dangling legs as Will folds under him.

Stretched out on the covers, watching down the length of his body as Hannibal unlaces and removes his boots, Will tries not to think too much about how this view is going to change over the coming months. His belly will swell as the child inside him grows, and he finds his hand reaching for his stomach even as Hannibal's clever fingers unbuckle his belt and tug down the zip on his jeans.

Am I really having a baby with him?

Watching his mate reach, unknowingly, for his womb, Hannibal allows himself a single, proud purr, encouraging the instincts in his Omega. He has no intention of telling Will about his pregnancy; at least not yet. So much could still go wrong, especially after such a difficult Heat. He wants to wait until there can be no doubt, and no going back.

Will lifts his hips to help Hannibal tug the jeans down and off, following with his boxers and socks, and he shivers as the cool air tickles his exposed thighs, drifting over the throbbing heat of his erection. Hannibal licks his lips at the sight of him, and Will huffs a laugh, surging upright to wrap his legs around the back of Hannibal's knees and start undressing him.

'There's a distinct imbalance here,' he explains, unbuttoning Hannibal's waistcoat as the Alpha shrugs out of his coat and suit jacket. 'Let's address that.'

'Let's,' Hannibal agrees, stroking Will's hair and kissing his face again. He nuzzles Will's temple, hands dropping to the buttons of his mate's seafoam shirt, remembering the last time he took this item of clothing off him. His Omega had been lost to his Heat prodrome, pliant and burning hot, a mess of hormones and desperate for anything, any little touch to ease the ache inside him. Will's touch, whilst still warm, is slower now, more certain, and Hannibal finds himself appreciating it all the more. This isn't biology; this is attraction.

His shirt slithers down his arms, and Will shoves it away in order to focus more on Hannibal's suit. The silk tie whispers against the expensive cotton before fluttering off to the floor, followed by his cufflinks. Will is careful with the buttons, not wanting to snap the threads, and Hannibal busies himself toeing off his shoes and unzipping his pants.

The socks are last, and then they are both blessedly naked. Will lies back, tugging Hannibal with him, welcoming his Alpha's weight between spread thighs and stroking up and down the firm muscles of the other man's back. He buries his face in the curve of Hannibal's shoulder, greedily inhaling the smell of him, blotting out his memories of the early evening and focusing on the here and now. On the feel of skin against skin, leg and pelvic hair sliding together, lips meeting in kisses that start slow and tender, but deepen until he's aching with desire.

Hannibal props himself on his elbow, his left hand cupping the back of Will's neck, palm *just* grazing the burning ridges of his crest, and spreads his right hand over the soft mound of his Omega's pectoral. He rolls a darkening nipple between forefinger and thumb, grinning when Will hums his approval of the gesture, and then drops his mouth to kiss and suckle at the other one, flicking the tip of his tongue over the hard, sweet-tasting bud before catching it between his teeth and biting, ever so carefully.

Will hisses at the sensation, the shock of pain making the next wave of pleasure that bit warmer. There's a resulting pulse in his cock, and he squirms as the first dribble of slick escapes him. Hannibal purrs like a tiger and rasps the rough flat of his tongue over the newly bitten nipple, pinching the other and then rubbing it better as Will arches beneath him. He feels Will's arms wrap around his shoulders, calloused palms rubbing up and down his shoulder-blades, memorizing the slide of muscles under golden skin, and he rolls back on top of the smaller man, the tingling tip of his length nudging against welcoming heat between Will's downy buttocks.

'In,' Will breathes, digging his fingers into Hannibal's flank and urging him closer. He tilts his pelvis up, spreading as wide as he can, angling himself for an easier entry, and Hannibal hums his approval. He kneels up, taking hold of the base of his shaft and guiding himself to the glistening ring of muscle just waiting to part for him. He pushes forwards, his breath catching at the moment of resistance and then the sudden plunge, the silky slide and the vice-like grip sucking him in to the root, until skin slaps against skin and he's crushing Will's hardness between their bodies as he bows down over his mate.

Will shudders, groaning at the sudden invasion, the aching stretch and the faint flicker of pleasure, his heart battering against his ribcage as he hugs Hannibal close. His knees cradle his Alpha's sides, back tense to hold himself up as he bears down around the pulsing cock inside him, hissing at the spark of arousal, chasing more of the sensation, desperate for Hannibal to move, to *do* something.

'Easy,' Hannibal murmurs, stroking a curl back from Will's forehead. He braces himself on one arm and rolls his hips, dragging halfway out of his mate's body before pushing back into the inferno. Will releases a low moan, clutching him tight, and bucks up into the next one, matching him thrust for thrust. Like the kisses, it begins slow, with Hannibal rocking in as deep as he can go, holding himself back from pounding into the willing body beneath him because he knows it will be so much better if they wait.

Will's lungs are too small. His world shrinks to the feel of Hannibal moving inside him, Hannibal's hot, strong body over him, mounting him, claiming him; Hannibal's hands in his hair and on his neck, *so* close to his crest that he can feel the scar swell in anticipation. But the Alpha is being so fucking *controlled*, so steady and deep, rubbing every inch along his sensitive insides in *just* the right way to make his eyes water, make his heart ache and his mind melt.

'Please,' he gasps, gazing sightlessly into his partner's face, into maroon eyes where monsters dance, a darkness barely contained by honeyed skin… 'Hannibal, *please*.'

'I've got you,' Hannibal whispers, leaning down for another kiss, matching it with another roll of his hips, slightly harder this time, producing an exquisite shiver and whimper from his Omega. Grabbing each of Will's wrists, squeezing just enough to feel the delicate bones grind together, he pins the other man's arms to either side of his head, baring his teeth in a snarl and forcing Will to bend his body further up and round, exposing more of himself for mounting.

'Fuck!' Will rolls his head up and back, baring his throat in submission. He's burning hot, sweat glistening on his forehead and dampening the small of his back. Every pulse of desire makes more slick, so much that he can feel it running over his ass cheeks, and dampening the

thatch of hair at Hannibal's groin. They're making wet, smacking sounds as they move now, their breath coming in harsh pants. Hannibal's ashen hair falls over his face and Will can see that he's gritting his teeth to keep from coming, counting the strokes until he finishes.

Hannibal shudders, abandoning Will's wrists to wrap him in a hug, adjusting the angle and thrusting up into him, harder, harder, harder, pulling Will flush against him and locking his mouth onto his Omega's neck. His hands slip around to the crest and he knows he's going to come, he's peaking already, golden fire crashing through him and exploding out of him in a final, sharp jerk of his hips, spilling his seed inside the other man before his knot swells, clutched tight by fluttering muscles and locking them together.

Will comes with a hoarse cry, the sting of teeth piercing his throat tipping him over the edge into an orgasm that brings wave after wave of climax. His ears are ringing, every muscle clenching again and again, drawing out the sensation, pulling Hannibal's knot as far into him as it can go. He can't breathe, he can't *think*, can't do anything but *feel*, and what he feels is fucking *amazing*. He's so *light*, so good and so happy, so complete that he doesn't ever want it to stop.

I love you.

He doesn't know if it's his thought or Hannibal's. The room blurs, shifting until he's under a painted ceiling, in a canopied bed with white covers, his Alpha almost glowing in the light of a thousand candles. It's their room, their shared place, and it's warm and bright and *safe*. Home, no matter where they are. No matter how separate they might be.

I can always find you here.

The thought comes like words but it flows like water without sound, and, once again, Will doesn't know whose thought it is. Their voices are entwined here. They are one person. Where he ends, Hannibal begins. Their darkness blends, throbbing like a heartbeat, endless and glorious in its potential.

Chuckling at the description, certain that *that* at least, is coming from his Alpha, Will nuzzles along Hannibal's flushed cheek.

'Tha'was *incredible*,' he mumbles, grinning into the hot skin.

The other man smiles, and the rose-marble room fades, replaced by the large windows, soft lamps and old wood of Will's farmhouse. Hannibal peppers kisses all along Will's jaw, up his nose and across his damp forehead, humming a laugh when Will bats at him with a playful ineffectiveness.

'*You* are incredible,' the Alpha says, earning a sleepy huff and a blushing smile from his mate, before Will settles, boneless, beneath him. He refuses to allow his endorphin-soaked brain to wander back to dangerous waters, even if he could. The whole point of this was to relax, and to not think for a while. Hannibal has certainly proved to be an expert lover and entirely capable of distracting him.

I don't ever want to lose this.

Pain rips at him, and Will reaches for Hannibal without thinking, pulling him down into another fierce hug. Hannibal drapes himself over the Omega's smaller frame, purring to soothe the distress he can smell, and Will rubs up against his Alpha's skin, covering himself in his mate's scent, suckling at the sweaty skin on the round meat of Hannibal's shoulder, promising without words that he won't leave.

'Sleep,' Hannibal murmurs, adjusting himself to lie alongside Will's body when the knot sealing them together finally subsides. Will grumbles something under his breath, heavy eyelids already slipping shut at the suggestion, and Hannibal smiles when he realizes what his Omega is arguing about.

Need to feed the dogs.

'You owe me for this,' the Alpha whispers, pressing a final kiss to his mate's temple. He cradles Will's head until he can slide a pillow beneath it, and rolls him onto his side before wrapping him in the covers to keep him warm as he slips from the bed to sort the animals.

The fluffy brown one cocks its head inquisitively when Hannibal pads, naked, into the kitchen, but soon rubs against his bare legs and sits, patiently, by the large food bowl near the back door. The hand-mixed meat is in the refrigerator, and Hannibal deposits the raw food into the dish for them, watching with some satisfaction as the more dominant members of the pack feed first, followed by the betas, and finally the omega, which, oddly, is not the smallest dog, but a mid-sized chestnut Pitbull mix.

Letting the dogs outside, Hannibal closes the door on the freezing air and busies himself switching on the space heater in the fireplace, securing the front door and turning off the lights. By the time he's done, the pack is ready to come back in, and Will's breathing is deep and even. He doesn't even stir when Hannibal moves him around in the bed, slipping under the covers and cradling him to his chest.

'Sleep well, *mylimasis*,' Hannibal whispers, pressing a final kiss to Will's forehead before relaxing back into the soft sheets. He holds Will close, savoring the warmth of his Omega's body, and rests his free hand on Will's belly. 'Both of you.'

***

Will knows he's dreaming. He's outside, in the snow-laced woods of rural Virginia, but he's not cold. His dream self is wearing his new woolen coat, the cashmere scarf wound tight about his throat to protect from the wind, and the same dark jeans, boots and butter-soft leather gloves that he wore to the stables… His new favorite outfit from Hannibal.

'Which answer is it you want to hear, Will?'

His Alpha's voice is clear and warm, with the same curiosity he holds when in their sessions. Even in his dreams, Hannibal is annoyingly self-composed.

'What's happening now, and *about* to happen, *is* an answer,' Will replies. He gazes at the other man, and Hannibal gazes back. His Alpha is lashed to a sturdy tree trunk, thick rope looped around his neck with enough slack that it can slide against itself and tighten. Hannibal

can't move, can't escape, but Will can control how much he can breathe. How *attached* his head remains.

'Ein Männlein steht im Walde ganz, still und stumm. Es hat von lauter Purpur ein Mäntlein um.'

Very softly, carried on the wind, there is the faint sound of a child singing. The verse ebbs and flows like the lap of waves on a beach, and Will imagines that he feels his baby move inside him.

It feels like a swoop of excitement.

'I want an *admission*,' he hisses, baring his teeth at the other man. 'I want you to admit what you are.'

Murderer. Cannibal. Lover.

'Must I denounce myself as a monster?' Hannibal replies, perfectly still in his bindings, dressed in his smart suit and coat from earlier that evening, his voice strained from the pressure of the rope across his throat. 'While you still refuse to see the one growing inside you?'

My baby is not a monster, and neither am I.

Instead of answering, Will turns his face away, and whistles sharply. Just once; the same whistle that Hannibal used to train Cesar, his childhood draft horse. But instead of a horse hitched to the rope, making it creak and tighten against Hannibal's skin, it is the Ravenstag. The nightmare creature from Will's nightmares.

He's no longer afraid of it. It's *his* creature, now. His protector. His darkness, made manifest.

'Why not appeal to my better nature?' Hannibal asks, tilting his head a fraction.

Will sneers at him.

'I wasn't aware you *had* one.'

He begins to advance, one step at a time, the snow crunching beneath his boots. As he does, Hannibal speaks again, and the words are soothingly familiar, like something from a memory.

'No-one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them. By that love, we see potential in our beloved. Through that love, we allow our beloved to see their potential.'

Mylimasis. It means "beloved" in my mother tongue. That's what you are, Will. Beloved.

Will pauses, still a few steps away from his Alpha. Hannibal's expression softens, and he regards Will with something akin to affection.

'Expressing that love, our beloved's potential comes true.'

You have so much potential, mylimasis. There is so much we can achieve, together.

Instead of replying, Will makes himself whistle again. The Ravenstag snorts, its breath billowing in plumes from ebony nostrils, and the ropes tighten ever further, rubbing welts into Hannibal's skin. Will comes closer, his eyes blurring with tears and heart stilling because he knows what he has to do. What a part of him *wants* to do.

'I promised you a reckoning.'

It's not his mate that he speaks to, now, but the monster inside the man. The human façade melts away, and Will stares into the gaunt face and hollow eyes of the wendigo. He tracks the razor antlers rising from its head and his skin crawls as its ribs flare with every breath. It's always starving. It can never be sated.

Hannibal will never stop.

'Here it is,' he breathes, watching the ropes tighten inch by inch, creaking their protest.

Fire licks up his spine, settling like an iron on the nape of his neck. He could stop this; he knows that a snap of his fingers would halt the stag.

He does nothing. Just watches, with his skin tingling, as the ropes squeeze and squeeze until –

Will wakes with a gasp, his body drenched with sweat, mind still reeling from the spray of blood as Hannibal's head separated from his body. His eyes had bulged, the sclera running red with burst capillaries, his skin ripping like paper…

His heart is racing, his muscles twitching with the adrenaline still coursing through his system. He's painfully hard, his erection tenting the covers, and he can feel his crest throbbing in time with his balls.

Fuck…

Wiping cooling sweat from his brow, Will rolls his head to side and looks at his sleeping Alpha. Hannibal is facing him, still half-curled in the same position they'd fallen asleep in earlier. His breathing is slow and even, his eyes only moving occasionally.

What do you dream of?

Will stops himself from reaching out; he doesn't want to disturb the other man, and he doesn't want to have to explain why he's in the state he is.

His cock gives another twitch, reminding him of the intense arousal felt at the idea of killing Hannibal Lecter. He slips a hand beneath the blankets, biting his lower lip between his teeth at the first zing of guilty pleasure when he touches himself. It's been ages since he jerked himself off, and the idea of doing it while Hannibal lies asleep beside him is its own kind of thrill.

In the silence of the night, with only faint moonlight and the glow of blue clock numbers to illuminate the room, Will feels safe to indulge himself. He stares up at the ceiling, replaying the dream in his mind's eye. Hannibal straining against the ropes. Hannibal spilling silken words of love and potential. Words that had warmed him from the inside and made him want to wrap himself around the Alpha and open himself up to whatever he wanted…

The friction of his palm against the tender flesh of his erection is perfect. Will massages circles into the weeping tip with his thumb, freezing when a wanton moan slips free of his throat. Panicked, still sweating but from pleasure, now, he darts a panicked glance at Hannibal, to see if it's woken him. He jumps, embarrassment flushing his whole body bright red and flooding him with tingles when he realizes what Hannibal has obviously been awake and watching him for some time.

The other man gazes at him, his eyes bright in the darkness, still as stone and utterly captivated by the sight of his partner pleasuring himself.

'Keep going,' Hannibal whispers, reaching out and guiding Will's hand to resume. He smiles when he feels the Omega buck into the touch, Will's pleasure spiking at the idea of displaying himself. Of doing it *for* him. 'I want to see you come.'

Fuck.

Will's struggling to remember how to breathe. He can smell himself rising from the covers, carried on the air as he shifts position. It's thick and rich, a smoky scent not unlike his killer's shadow. He arches his back, pinching at his nipples with his other hand, and Hannibal helps him to push the covers down his legs to free his cock to the cool air. His skin pebbles, stripes burning wherever Hannibal's eyes touch him, and he shudders as he starts to jerk himself faster.

He's imagining Hannibal's blood jetting out into the frozen air, forming ruby crystals in the snow. He can taste it, salt and copper on his tongue, and sees himself dipping his head to the ruined neck of his Alpha, lapping at the severed artery and coating his face in red.

At the same time, he can see the real Hannibal watching him. Feel the pride in his gaze as he savors the sight of him pleasuring himself.

This is what I want for you, Will.

Will starts to pant, rubbing hard and fast. He tugs on his balls, adding a spark of almost-pain to the mix, and then dips his hand down to the slick glistening between his ass cheeks. Using the tingling wetness to ease the slide of skin on skin, he starts to thrust up into the grip without thought.

He's going to come. He can feel it; a tightening in his gut, coiling like a spring. He gasps, looking at Hannibal again, almost pleading with him even though he's the one in charge here. He's the one who can make it last or make it tip over it that pure bliss…

'That's it,' Hannibal breathes, his eyes blazing like hellfire in the shadows. 'Beautiful boy. Come for me.'

And Will does. He pumps twice more and then spills himself all over his hand and stomach, hips rocking and hand squeezing, milking himself for all he's worth. He can smell the salt-sweet caramel of his release, mingling with the meaty, charcoal taste of Hannibal's pleasure, and his mouth waters. He groans, letting his softening cock slip from his hand and scooping up a fingerful of pearly wetness, curious what it tastes like now that he's pregnant. Before he can lift it to his lips, however, Hannibal leans in and engulfs all four of his fingers into his mouth, running his tongue up and down the digits and cleaning him of every drop.

'That was beautiful,' the Alpha whispers, cupping Will's flushed cheek and stroking his jaw with his thumb. 'What were you dreaming of? I heard a whistle.'

Killing you, Will thinks, rolling his head on the pillow to stare back into his Alpha's face. He hums softly, tilting his face into the touch, and then pulls the covers up to rearrange them over his waist as the cooling sweat makes him shiver.

'I'm tired,' he murmurs, instead of answering, and rubs the tacky release from his belly into the sheets. He'll want to change the bedding after allowing Hannibal to sleep with him, anyway. 'Did you want to…?'

'No, no.' Hannibal gives his own erection a fond smile, and then settles onto his back. 'That was perfect.'

'Hm.' Will punches his pillow into a more comfortable shape and settles himself on his side, curving one arm under his head and draping the other over his waist to stroke at the smooth plane of his belly.

Yes, he thinks, as sleep steals over him once again. *It was.*

***

Despite the late night and broken sleep, they both wake early the next morning, and Hannibal takes the first shower whilst Will cooks breakfast. They don't speak much; Will refuses to acknowledge the domestic bliss of their situation, and steadfastly ignores Hannibal's glee at having him all to himself.

'Would you like me to drop you at headquarters on my way to the office?' the Alpha asks, coming up behind the smaller man and nuzzling his shoulder. Will, flipping the last waffle from the machine, catches himself just as he goes to lean back, and stifles a moan behind pursed lips.

'Thanks,' he mutters, sliding out from Hannibal's grasp and turning to shove a plate into his hands, instead. 'I'd appreciate it.'

'Of course. This looks lovely, Will.' Hannibal takes his food and a mug of coffee to the rickety dining table in the other room. He sits down and sprinkles blueberries over the waffles, cutting a forkful and lifting it to his mouth. It's not something he'd choose to eat, but he savors the taste and texture because *Will* made it for him.

‘Didn’t fancy scrambled eggs, but it’s a way of using up my latest collection,’ Will says, wandering over to join him and drowning his own breakfast in syrup. ‘My neighbor has chickens,’ he adds, at Hannibal’s curious look. ‘She’s always giving me her spare eggs.’

‘I *love* cooking with local ingredients.’

Hannibal grins at the dry look that Will gives him, chuckling around another mouthful as his Omega mutters something that sounds distinctly like “I know you do”. Will frowns at him over the rim of his mug, sipping the one coffee he’s allowing himself today and wishing he’d thought to add a few shards of glass to his psychopath’s breakfast.

‘Will you still be joining me for our appointment this evening?’ Hannibal asks, steering the conversation to safer waters before Will recants his invitation and they lose the fragile trust they have gained.

‘Thought I might skip it,’ Will mutters, cutting into his waffle with more force than strictly necessary. ‘Give myself some space.’

‘Of course.’ Hannibal hides the disappointment from his voice, careful not to allow his emotions to slip through their bond. ‘I’ll make a note of it.’ He takes a breath, weighing his words, and then dips his head to look into his mate’s face. ‘If you feel the need to talk about what happened, though, whatever time it is, I’m here for you, Will.’

Still part of the problem.

Will swallows, licking glistening syrup from his lips, and nods before Hannibal speaks again. He can’t deal with the tightness in his chest; not right now.

They finish their meal in relative silence, only broken by Hannibal’s questions when Will takes a handful of remaining blueberries and feeds them to the dogs. Will grudgingly explains about the various fruits and vegetables the dogs can safely eat, and then moves onto his recipe for their food, and by the time the plates are empty and their mugs have been refilled, Hannibal has successfully engaged him in conversation for over an hour.

His efforts pay off when, as they rise to put on their coats and head to the front door, Will catches his elbow and pulls him in for a soft, lingering kiss.

‘So, um… what are you doing this weekend?’ the Omega asks, mumbling the words into his Alpha’s lips when Hannibal shows no intention of pulling away.

‘Whatever you want to do,’ Hannibal replies, smiling when Will rolls his eyes with a lopsided grin. ‘I have no plans I will not change for you, *mylimasis*.’

‘Flirt.’ Will ushers him out onto the porch and bids the dogs farewell before locking up. Hannibal stays a step behind him on their way to the car, and holds the door open for him before heading around to the driver’s side. Will sighs, but accepts the gesture without complaint.

‘I thought I might take the dogs out to the national park on Saturday,’ he continues, belting himself in as Hannibal starts the engine. ‘Do you… want to join us?’

‘I’d be honored.’ Hannibal smiles, his irises prickling red with affection, reflected in the gold of Will’s eyes. ‘Thank you.’

Will hums, and saves himself any further weakness by staring out at the passing scenery. He can’t, however, shake the warm joy burbling in his belly, spreading out like tendrils of golden light at the thought of spending more time with his Alpha.

It doesn’t mean anything… It’s just a walk… It’s not a date. And I could always drown him in the river and hide his body in the woods, if I wanted to.

It’s not a date.

***

His date with Will on Saturday was such a success that Hannibal finds himself more than willing to indulge Jack’s impromptu, and rather daring, request to join him for dinner on Sunday. What better way to end the weekend, after all, than to cook with an old friend?

Hannibal fries newly harvested organs in fresh butter from the organic market down the street, and whisks cream into six of the two dozen eggs that Will’s neighbor had sent him home with yesterday. The elderly Alpha had taken quite a shine to him, and proclaimed him “good” for young William, which had made Will blush an adorable shade of red and try to insist that they really weren’t all that serious, even as his crest had swelled and his scent had thickened.

His time in the Virginian countryside has left him yearning for the chance to show Will some of his own favorite places, and, as he cooks, Hannibal indulges himself a little planning. They’ll need passports, of course, and currency. An apartment… The dogs will require vaccination certificates and Will might insist on sailing, rather than flying, so as not to crate the dogs in the cargo hold…

The thick scars on his inner wrists ache in the Baltimore cold, and Hannibal winces as he adds the final touches. He wants to fly them both away from the bustle and noise of Baltimore, and do nothing more than laze in the sun and go for long walks with his Omega and their pets.

He hopes to persuade Will to join him in Europe, soon. Until then, he is back to maintaining appearances, and dons both tie, waistcoat and suit jacket before leaving the kitchen.

At least Jack Crawford, for all his bullish mannerisms, has the decency to be an appreciative guest. As Hannibal carries the two plates into the dining room, Jack turns from the fireplace with a wide smile on his face.

‘Mmm. That smells *wonderful*.’

Hannibal grins the compliment, and inclines his head in gratitude at the other Alpha. He comes around the table and speaks as he places the fine china before his companion.

‘My take on the Sacromonte omelet, made with liver and sweetbreads.’ He sets his own plate down as Jack takes his seat. ‘Sacramonte was the gypsyhood of Granada. I visited Granada when I was a young man.’

‘I’ve never been,’ Jack admits, smiling ruefully as Hannibal unbuttons his jacket and sits across from him. Outside, thick snow falls in a silencing blanket on the patio of Hannibal’s back yard, and the soft glow of the lamps cast long shadows into the edges of the dining room.

‘No?’ Hannibal picks up his knife and fork, the blade winking at him, and takes a deep breath to gather up the smell of his meal. ‘I fell in love with many things; particularly this dish.’ He cuts into the omelet, the eggs soft and fluffy, perfectly seasoned. ‘I remember my time there so vividly, like I frescoed the walls of my mind.’

I hope to share some of those frescoes with Will, as well as reality.

‘I used to be afraid of losing my memory,’ Jack says, gathering up a piece of omelet onto his fork but pausing before lifting it to his lips. He sighs. ‘What I wouldn’t give to *forget* a thing or two now.’ Another rueful smile, at everything that’s passed between them. Everything Hannibal has been accused of.

Jack puts the omelet into his mouth and chews.

‘*Mmm.’* He nods. ‘My compliments to the gypsyhood of Granada.’

‘Memory gives moment immortality,’ Hannibal says, scooping up his second forkful. ‘But forgetfulness promotes a healthy mind.’ He smiles at Jack. ‘It’s good to forget.’ And then, because he cannot resist the urge, he asks softly, ‘What are you trying to forget, Jack?’

‘Doubt.’ His fellow Alpha huffs, and takes a swig of the crisp white wine Hannibal has paired with the meal. ‘I let doubt in.’

Hannibal lowers his gaze to the display of peacock feathers and pomegranates between them.

‘About me?’

‘About *Will*,’ Jack says. He takes another sip of wine, and Hannibal does the same, allowing the silence to grow between them, until becomes uncomfortably heavy. So, there it is, once again. Jack Crawford wants to know what is going on inside his precious Omega. How tedious.

‘I can no longer discuss Will’s state of mind with you,’ Hannibal reminds him, setting his glass down by the stem. ‘Or anyone else without his consent. Will’s officially my mate, and my patient. I own his guardianship now, not his father, and he employs me; not the FBI.’

There is a flicker of petulance in Jack’s dark eyes, the merest hint of crimson in his otherwise dark irises, and then he smiles genially and nods, raising another forkful of egg to his mouth.

‘Well, let’s hope your therapy works.’

Hannibal hums.

‘Therapy only works when we have a genuine desire to know ourselves as we are.’ He smooths a full array of omelet and chive dressing onto his fork. ‘Not as we would like to be.’

For as long as remains intent on hiding his true nature, there can be no progress. But he was so ready to kill Clark Ingram… Point him at the right target, and he may well take that final step.

I just need to find the right target.

***

He’ll be glad when it gets warmer.

Hurrying back to his truck after a rest-stop dinner of steak and chips, Ben McAllister sips at his coffee to fight off the frigid air, his boots crunching in the fresh snow around him. In the hour he spent inside the diner, his windshield has already covered in a thick blanket of white, and he grunts softly as his old bones ache protest when he pulls himself up into the cab.

At least it’s clear, now.

Another gulp of coffee, the strong black thawing him from the inside, and Ben starts the engine. Betsy roars to life, but before Ben can put her into gear, something lands with a bang on the roof.

‘What the…?’

He grabs his flashlight and jumps back out, moving slowly along the length of the truck. Is it an animal? A fallen branch? Or some idiot trying to steal a ride?

Grumbling to himself, wishing he’d had the forethought to relieve himself one last time, Ben checks under the tires, looks for anything trapped in the suspension, but there’s nothing. Not even a footprint. Maybe it was just falling snow.

It’s as he heads back to the cab that he realizes he’s being watched. He’s heard that Betas aren’t as sensitive to their environments as Alphas and Omegas, but he *knows* he’s not alone. Every single hair stands straight up on his arms and the back of his head, and a deep, visceral part of him knows he needs to run.

And then it’s on him, and it’s too late.

Ben screams as claws tear through his jacket and puncture his flesh, slicing it away from his bones. He feels himself lifted, his feet leaving the floor, and there’s a sickening moment where the world tilts, where all he can see is a sky full of stars and a crescent moon…

He’s still alive when the beast starts tearing out his intestines, but he can’t move. He can’t do anything but *feel*. Pain and terror and a terrible sense of regret because he’s not ready to die.

It's not his time. There's still so much he wants to *do*.

At least he's not cold anymore. He can see his blood, steaming as it sprays from severed arteries, a great rush and then a pulse, and then a trickle.

By the time he's dead, Ben McAllister is little more than a mangled torso. The creature hunkers over him, protecting its kill, but it doesn't eat. It just rips. And, from the depths of its skull, its eyes blaze crimson.

***

It's not all that long between Sunday afternoon and Monday evening, but Will still finds himself arriving early for his scheduled appointment and hanging around for twenty minutes in Hannibal's waiting room. He tries to sit, at first, but his knee bounces and he annoys himself with how much he's fidgeting. It's warm, so he removes his coat and drapes the grey wool over the back of a spare armchair before pacing.

Maybe he should have worn a different outfit. He's dressed in the new marl-colored sweater that Hannibal bought him; another Omegan addition to his wardrobe that he likes more than he'd cared to admit, and the cashmere is warm and soft, the silk lining is gentle on his crest. But, more than these additions, he likes it because *Hannibal* chose it for him.

He hadn't *meant* to spend the weekend with his Alpha; it had just *happened.* He'd had a moment of weakness following Peter's arrest, letting Hannibal stay the night, and then he'd gone and invited him for a walk with the dogs on Saturday. *That*, of course, had turned into a day-trip through the Virginian countryside – Hannibal had brought a picnic – followed by an oddly romantic dinner where Hannibal made game stew with fresh bread.

It only made sense, then, after being fucked stupid until dawn, that Will had agreed to let the Alpha take him shopping on Sunday, as thanks for indulging his more rustic lifestyle.

And now he's dressed in an all-new outfit, with another closet's worth of Omegan clothes waiting to be unpacked at home. The only consolation – not that the clothes aren't gorgeous – is that Hannibal bought the ridiculous hat that Will picked out as a joke; a hideous combination of faux fur, suede and *earflaps*, meant to be worn the next time they walk the dogs together.

The sound of the office door opening jolts him from his thoughts, and Will looks up to see his Alpha showing the previous patient out.

Hannibal smiles at Will, though he gives the appearance of devoting his attention to the previous man; a nervous Beta in an overly expensive suit. Will feels a tug and finds himself nervously rubbing his fingers together, hoping his clothes look alright, that his face looks alright, that the world will start to see him as the strong and powerful man that he is… Soon…

'Hello, Will.'

Will shakes off the other man's emotions and ducks his head as he strides into the room. No wonder he couldn't settle.

'He's a *wreck*,' he mutters, handing his coat to the other man for him to hang.

Hannibal smirks as he does so, and closes the door with a soft click.

'You should have seen him before.' He follows Will further into the room, admiring the roundness of his backside in the new trousers, and the curve of his shoulders in the new sweater. 'You look good, Will.'

'Hm.' Will nods, and runs a finger along the pristine edge of Hannibal's desk. He moves around it, tucking one hand into his pocket, idly fiddling with Hannibal's pen, his diary, his clock. 'I haven't put everything away, yet,' he adds, looking up at the Alpha. At Hannibal's piercing gaze, he falters, and looks back at the timepiece. 'Not decided if I want to keep it all…'

Hannibal permits Will his evasiveness, and busies himself with pouring them each a glass of water before he sits down. By the time he's finished, Will has adjusted the clock to match his own watch and wandered around to his armchair.

'I've been thinking a lot about last week.' Will wets his lips and looks away, his eyes trained on the snow falling outside, but his gaze distant. 'About Clark, and Peter… And about us spending more time together.'

Hannibal holds himself still, forcing himself to hold his tongue. Will needs to work through his thoughts alone, and he won't speak until he's asked a direct question. He clasps his hands in his lap, and watches closely as his Omega's brow creases into a contemplative frown.

In his mind's eye, Will replays his final moments on Thursday evening. Clark Ingram, bloodied and bruised, begging on his knees before him. Hannibal, fierce and proud beside him. And the gun, so light and warm in his hands…

He was right there… Such an easy target… And I felt so powerful. So strong. My finger tightened on that trigger and then –

'Do you have any regrets?'

Will's voice is soft, and he doesn't look up as he speaks. Hannibal considers the question, and chooses his words carefully before answering.

'With every choice lies the possibility of regret,' he admits. 'However, if I choose not to do something, it's usually for a good reason.'

Will nods, still staring, not even seeing the tall windows or the burgundy walls, or the grey wood floor, anymore. He only sees that moment, when Hannibal stopped him from killing the man who murdered sixteen women, and raped Peter Bernardone. Bit him and forced a bond on him that he never wanted… Who blamed his Omega for the killings and had him incarcerated…

He swallows.

‘I’m… *riddled* with regrets.’

‘A life without regret would be no life at all,’ Hannibal says gently, seeking to soothe him, hoping Will isn’t regretting their weekend together. It was such a wonderful taste of what their life *could* be… He can’t go back, now. He doesn’t even know if he can slow down. He wants to Court Will with every trick and gift he can think of, and have his glorious mate with him always. But, if he pushes, he could lose him forever.

Will’s frown melts away at Hannibal’s response, though he continues to avoid eye contact with him.

‘I… regret what I did in the stable,’ he confesses, and, from the corner of his eye, he sees Hannibal’s gaze flash crimson.

‘Then you were lucky I was there,’ the Alpha says calmly, even as disappointment licks at his insides. It is quickly replaced with surprise, however, when Will finally looks up and smiles. It is a knife-sharp quirk of his lips, and Hannibal’s darkness swells as he senses the shadow inside his mate behind the expression.

‘Oh, no, no, *no*,’ Will croons, his scent sugar-sweet and smoky. ‘Being *lucky* isn’t the same as making a *mistake*.’ His eyes flicker gold, and Hannibal’s breath catches. ‘The *mistake*,’ Will says, speaking very carefully, ‘was allowing you to *stop* me.’

Oh… My beloved.

‘So, it’s not pulling the trigger that you regret,’ Hannibal replies, his burgundy gaze locked onto Will. He imagines a storm could rage around them and he would only have eyes for his beloved. ‘It’s not pulling it *effectively*.’

‘*That* would be more *accurate*.’ Will trembles as he speaks, his rage scant millimeters from the surface. Hannibal, on the other hand, is the epitome of calm control, though Will can feel his excitement dancing like lightning through their bond, and, when he speaks, there is an undercurrent of joy to his voice.

‘You must adapt your behavior to avoid feeling the same way again, Will.’

Will hums, eyes alight with a new fire, now.

‘Adapt… Evolve…’ He looks at his Alpha; his monster, his mate, and feels his crest pulse. ‘*Become*.’

‘Yes,’ Hannibal breathes, locking his muscles so as not to lunge forwards and slip into Rut at the very idea of Will becoming just like him. An apex predator; the perfect partner. The perfect mate. ‘I want you to close your eyes,’ he continues, feeling his own irises prickling red. ‘Imagine a version of events you wouldn’t have regretted.’

Will obeys without hesitation, only too eager to indulge the desire, and returns to the moment in the stable. He can smell the coppery tang of blood, mingled with sweet hay. He can hear

the bleating of the sheep in its pen behind him… He can feel the heat radiating from Hannibal, right beside him. And there, on his knees, is Clark Ingram.

The revolver thrums in his hand, pushing up into his palm. It *wants* to be used; it's made for this. Made to kill. Just like him. The click of him cocking the gun is obscenely loud in the silence, and the Alpha before him flinches, whimpering out pathetic cries for mercy.

Will's forefinger tightens on the trigger, the muscles taut as a bowstring. One squeeze, and it'll all be over.

You deserve this, for everything you've done.

In his memory, Hannibal had grabbed the gun and stopped him. But this time, in this reality… The bullet leaves the chamber with a deafening bang. The metal pierces Clark Ingram's forehead, ripping through bone and brain to erupt from the back of his skull and lodge in the far wall, spattering the floor with his insides.

Will imagines Hannibal's purr, rumbling like a tiger, even as he watches Clark crumple like a puppet with its strings cut.

Beautiful.

Opening his eyes, Will blinks away tears and tries to focus on the present. It felt so *real*; so *right*… He's not sure it didn't actually happen…

'What did you see?' Hannibal whispers, anchoring Will in this time and space with him. His heart aches to see the look of longing on his Omega's face; Will's lower lip trembles and, when he speaks, his voice is hushed.

'A… missed opportunity.' A quick swallow. Will tries to wet his lips, but his mouth is dry. Funny, since his palms feel sweaty. His heart is racing, and his belly squirms with excitement. 'To feel like I felt when I killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs…' Another swallow. He looks into Hannibal's eyes, drowning in the maroon of his Alpha's gaze. 'To feel like… Like I felt when I thought I'd killed *you*.'

Yes.

Hannibal licks his lips, tasting the heavy, testosterone-laden scent in the air. Will doesn't even realize he's aroused, but Hannibal can see how hard he is, and smell the sharp sweetness of slick. His own body reacts; muscles bunching and heart racing, flooding him with adrenaline.

'And what does that feel like?' he breathes, leaning closer towards his mate. Will quivers, his pupils blowing wide and heart hammering behind his ribs.

'I felt a quiet sense of… *power*.'

'Good.' Hannibal purrs, just once; a low, throaty rumble. 'Remember that feeling.'

Will shivers, and rubs his hands on his knees.

‘Don’t think I could forget it.’ He tries to laugh, but the emotion is too heavy and his smile fades. He searches Hannibal’s face, willingly drowning in the intensity of his Alpha’s gaze. ‘Is that what you feel?’

Is that why you kill?

‘Yes.’

Hannibal’s admission, barely more than a whisper, tears at something inside Will. He’s still shaking, but he feels strong. Absurdly, he feels like he’s learning how to harness the darkness inside him, like wrangling the Ravenstag, rather than losing control. He pushes up from the chair, swaying closer to Hannibal, forcing the Alpha to tilt his head back to watch him.

‘What does it feel like with me?’ Will asks, wedging one knee between Hannibal’s thigh and the armchair, swinging his other leg over to straddle the Alpha’s lap. He leans down, lips barely brushing the other man’s, golden eyes locked onto crimson. ‘When you mount me. Dominate me. When you fucked with my mind… How did it make you feel?’

‘Powerful,’ Hannibal says, his hands coming up to hold Will’s waist. He slides his fingers under the hem of his Omega’s sweater, finding the hot skin beneath, and massages circles even as Will starts to rock his hardness against his chest. ‘And yet, at the same time, I have never been more helpless.’

‘Helpless?’ Will barks a laugh, fiddling with Hannibal’s tie as his mate strokes up and down his back. ‘The great Hannibal Lecter, helpless before an *Omega?’*

‘Helpless before *you*, Will.’ Hannibal cups the back of Will’s head with his right hand, pulling him down for a kiss. Will purrs into the touch, sucking on Hannibal’s tongue when the Alpha offers it. He swallows down the taste of him, clumsy fingers fumbling to undo Hannibal’s pants, groaning when Hannibal stops him.

‘I can’t; I have another patient after you.’ Hannibal brings both hands to the fly of Will’s trousers, deftly unzipping them and tugging them open. ‘*You*, however…’

‘Oh, fuck…’ Will grins, looking down as his Alpha palms his cock and begins to stroke, flicking over the sensitive tip with his thumb. ‘Won’t it stain your suit?’

‘No.’ Hannibal plucks his handkerchief from the pocket of his jacket, grinning wickedly as he shakes it out. He wraps the silk over Will’s erection, offering a thin layer of protection between his Omega’s release and his clothes, whilst adding a plethora of different sensations to the touch. ‘You said you wanted to kill me with your hands. Is that still the case?’

‘W-what?’ Will grabs for Hannibal’s shoulders, his hips bucking forwards at the mention of his darkest desire. His dream comes back to him; the gush of blood, the tearing skin… The *control* he’d had over someone else’s *life*... ‘Hannibal, I don’t –’

‘Tell me,’ Hannibal whispers, his left hand creeping up Will’s front to tease his nipples as his right hand works rhythmically to draw pleasure from his mate. ‘How would you kill me?’

‘I’d… *ah, fuck!* I’d tear your throat out,’ Will gasps, gazing into his Alpha’s blazing eyes. Hannibal is quivering, rock-hard inside his suit and almost *glowing* with furious pride at seeing Will’s true self. His dark urges, so carefully cultivated and brought to the surface. ‘I’d fight you, and beat you down… I’d strangle you and bite you, and beat you unconscious.’

Hannibal’s grip tightens around his throbbing cock, and Will’s balls jump. He can see it; his Alpha, his control stripped back, his neatness gone. He would be wild… Savage.

Glorious.

‘Hannibal…’ Will’s voice catches and he shudders, rolling his hips into the touch. Hannibal nods, still drinking in the hunger on Will’s face, the vicious desire so desperate to be freed, and then his Omega is coming, wetting the silk and filling the hot air between them with the smoky, salty scent of his seed.

Will crushes his lips to Hannibal’s, tasting copper where teeth cut his flesh. He doesn’t care. He shudders his way through the orgasm, arms wrapped tight around his insane, unimaginable mate, every fiber of his being singing with joy at how *right* it feels. How *complete* he is. For the first time in his life, all the parts of him have come together in perfect harmony.

The finest china.

Hannibal’s purrs fill the silence when they finally break the kiss. Will sags, grinning like an idiot as his heart slows, his skin tacky with drying sweat and muscles aching from the awkward position. He takes the ruined handkerchief from Hannibal and crumples it up, dropping it on the pristine glass side table, nibbling along his Alpha’s jaw when the other man looks annoyed by the mess.

‘I love pissing you off,’ Will breathes, skating his fingertips over the little nub of Hannibal’s scent gland in the front of his throat. He can feel it swelling beneath the surface of the skin, and presses a reverent kiss to it, even as Hannibal holds his breath and tips his head back in surrender.

‘Will…’

‘Soon,’ Will purrs, licking a stripe up the column of Hannibal’s neck. He kisses the other man’s clean-shaven cheeks, the tip of his nose and then his forehead, worshiping the face of his monster. ‘I’ll bite you soon.’

‘Will you stop?’ Hannibal asks, more calmly than he feels. His heart skips a beat when Will draws back, exposed before the Omega’s scrutiny.

Will doesn’t say anything. He promised not to lie. He studies Hannibal, thinking back to that sense of power at thinking he’d killed him.

You must adapt your behavior.

He wants to feel it again.

Hannibal sees the shadows swarm in his lover's eyes, gold dancing with blue, and the swell of love makes tears well in his own. He cards his hands through Will's curls and his kiss-red lips curve into a crooked smile.

'If *anyone* is going to kill me, it will be *you*. Only you. I promise.'

***

When he steps outside, the cold air is like a slap in the face, and Will has to take a deep breath to steady himself as he gets his bearings.

I just came to the idea of killing Hannibal.

He wishes he could have stayed; he feels like he needs another session to talk about what just happened in that one. Hannibal, utterly accepting of his desire to murder him… Encouraging it, even… Unafraid to die, if by Will's design…

The idea is… intoxicating.

What's happening to me?

Snow has been shoveled into black-tipped mounds on the sidewalk, and halos of frost shine around every lamppost. Will tracks the heat still pulsing under his skin, and shifts uncomfortably in clothes that feel too tight on his body. The urge to turn around is nearly overwhelming. He wants to tear Hannibal's fucking clothes off, ride his Alpha they *both* come screaming and then sink his teeth into his throat, draw his blood and –

'*I* tend to walk out of this building in a very similar state.'

A woman's drawl snaps him from his fantasy, and Will looks over to see a pretty young Omega approaching. Her lips are painted a daring red, offsetting the bright, virgin gold around her blue irises. Despite her scent, she walks with an Alpha's confidence, her stiletto heels clacking on the sidewalk. Will notes that her thin black pants and burgundy wrap-coat are made more for aesthetics than practicality, and wonders where her car is.

'*You* must be a patient of Dr Lecter's,' the other Omega adds, inspecting him curiously. Will drops his gaze, flexing his hands in his coat pockets and shrugging in confusion.

'I'm sorry?'

'You look *familiar*,' the woman explains, gesturing up and down with a leather-clad hand. 'I either know you, or I know *of* you…?'

Will huffs at that, and fixes his scowl somewhere in the region the designer handbag hanging from the woman's arm. Of course he looks familiar; Freddie Lounds was kind enough to splash his masked face all over her website and social news feeds for weeks.

'I'm the guy who *didn't* kill all those people,' he growls. He feels his eyes go, sees the flicker of surprise on the Omega's face when he bares his teeth at her, and then he's moving past her with a grim smile, leaving her to attend her own flagellation with Dr Lecter.

He needs to get home, feed the dogs and have a long shower.

***

‘I suppose it started when I was four.’

When she speaks, Margot’s voice is flat and distant. As she recounts another chilling tale from her childhood, she separates herself from the brutality that she describes, assigning only physical damage to the torment inflicted upon her by Mason. The things that she has endured are breathtaking.

In some respects, it’s a wonder that she is even alive, and no surprise that she is so beautifully damaged.

What strength to survive such cruelty.

But Margot refuses to acknowledge the sexual element of Mason’s treatment of her, and herein lies the barrier to her true becoming. She needs a push.

‘We all have a gauge for humanity that twitches when we see other people,’ Hannibal says, watching closely for the tell-tale flicker in the Omega’s eyes. ‘Tell me, Margot, what *twitches* when you see your brother?’

Margot takes a deep breath, forcibly calming herself so that, when she speaks, her voice is the same steady drawl as always.

‘*Not* my gauge for *humanity*.’

Hannibal nods, considering this. They are sitting in identical positions; their legs crossed at the knee, hands clasped in their laps, expressions deliberately impassive. Margot instinctively mirrors the him; a biological urge to shelter in an Alpha’s protection by fitting in with his expectations for behavior.

It’s not the same with Will… He doesn’t mirror me; he just sees my truth.

‘You don’t recognize in your brother basic human traits,’ Hannibal comments, tilting his head so that the burgundy rings around his dark irises catch the light. ‘You dehumanize him, as much as he dehumanizes you.’

‘At least I’ll never be the worst person I know,’ Margot replies drily, which draws a grin and a soft chuckle from Hannibal.

‘The tendency to see others as less human than ourselves is universal,’ he assures her.

‘My brother *is* less human,’ Margot says, pain making her eyes flash gold.

‘And you are less human for it,’ Hannibal says. Margot, to her credit, arches one perfectly sculpted brow over her gold-blue eye.

‘Did you just dehumanize *me?’*

Hannibal lifts one shoulder in a shrug.

‘Psychiatrists who dehumanize patients are more comfortable with painful but *effective* treatments.’

Margot hums, and then tilts her head as she narrows her eyes at Hannibal

‘*I* met a patient of yours,’ she says, watching carefully for his response. ‘Will Graham?’

Hannibal blinks, but that is the only sign of recognition he allows himself. Frustrated, Margot prods harder.

‘Wonder what sort of “painful but effective” treatment you prescribed *him?’*

‘What do you imagine?’ Hannibal asks, and Margot gives him a knife-quick smile, even as she drops her gaze to her crimson nails.

‘You’re very supportive of me killing my brother,’ she muses. ‘And I *appreciate* that support,’ she adds, looking up. ‘I really *do*. But I can only *imagine* what you’d be supportive of Will Graham doing…’ Her heart skips a beat, and unease coils in her stomach. ‘What kind of psychiatrist *are* you?’

‘You already had my reputation and bona fides verified,’ Hannibal says, as placid as ever. ‘You know what kind of psychiatrist I am.’

Margot swallows, wondering when her mouth got so dry. Hannibal’s expression hasn’t changed, and he hasn’t moved, but there’s something about him that whispers danger in a way that Mason never could, even during his worst rages.

‘I’m *beginning* to…’

***

Whilst not due to meet again for another day, fate and circumstance bring Will and Hannibal back together at ten o’clock the next morning.

Jack Crawford rings them both before breakfast, requesting their immediate presence at a grisly crime scene off the southern interstate. A trucker has been found in pieces after failing to arrive at the depot for his shift.

Hannibal offers to collect Will from his house and drive them both there, to allow the Omega time to eat breakfast. Will agrees, gladly returning to his second bowl of cereal and wondering if pancakes will take too long to cook. In the end, he decides to risk being late this one time for the satisfaction of thick, fluffy griddle cakes soaked with maple syrup, which is why, when Hannibal arrives, he is still showering.

The Alpha waits on the porch, shivering, but, after two knocks go unanswered, he lets himself into the house. The dogs bound over to greet him, shedding shed fur all over his coat and trousers, and licking his, thankfully, gloved hands. He gives a few of them pats and moves further into the living room, realizing immediately what has happened by the sound of

running water from the bathroom and the lingering scent of pancakes and syrup in the warm air.

‘Perhaps he’s carrying an Omega,’ he murmurs, absently speaking to Will’s new dog; Win-something. ‘With all those sugar cravings.’

He turns to the wide desk set beneath one of the large windows, running the tip of a leather-clad finger over the cover of a legal textbook. *Omegan Rights and Liberties in the United States, second edition.* There are a number of post-its tacked to pages throughout the volume where Will has clearly been making notes and referencing legislation during his discussions with his lawyer.

No wonder the contract was so thorough. My clever boy.

The shower turns off and, a moment later, Will steps out of the bathroom with just a towel wrapped around his waist. He’s dripping wet, his curls near black and plastered to his skull, and Hannibal smiles to see him.

‘Good morning, Will.’

‘When did *you* get here?’ Will grumbles, adjusting the towel and hurrying towards the bedroom area. Hannibal, of course, follows him, unbuttoning his coat and removing his gloves as he sits in one of the armchairs to watch, serenely, as Will rubs himself dry.

‘Be sure to wrap up warm today,’ Hannibal says, crimson-ringed eyes locked on his mate as Will huffs and pulls on boxers and dark jeans as fast as he can. ‘And wear a hat.’

‘You gonna wear yours?’ Will replies, rolling his stupidly over-priced but much needed Omegan deodorant onto his armpits before buttoning himself into one of the new silk-lined shirts from his closet. He refuses to acknowledge Hannibal’s hum of satisfaction at his choice, and covers the fine shirt with one of his old, scratchy sweaters. Thick socks and boots complete the outfit, and Hannibal nods his approval when Will turns for his opinion.

‘You look good,’ the Alpha says, tilting his head and admiring the view. ‘I like that shirt.’

‘Hm.’ Will runs a hand through his wet curls. ‘I need to dry my hair.’

‘Of course.’ Hannibal pulls out his little notebook and silver pen, and starts writing down mathematical equations to occupy himself whilst Will pads back to the bathroom. Ten minutes later, Will emerges with his curls still warm from the hairdryer, but tamed and styled back into a neat parting. Hannibal barely gets a chance to see, however, because Will pulls a black beanie down over his head, covering even his ears, and bundles himself into his grey herringbone coat and cashmere scarf. He pulls on the new leather gloves and then looks expectantly at the other man.

‘You seem almost eager,’ Hannibal says, rising from the chair and returning the book to his coat pocket as he follows Will from the house. When Will sighs, his breath billows in a cloud and he shivers at the wind biting the exposed skin of his cheeks.

‘Just want this over with,’ he mutters, locking the door in two jerky twists and knocking Hannibal’s hand away when his mate reaches for his elbow. ‘Let’s go.’

‘What do we know about the murder?’ Hannibal asks, keeping pace with Will as they crunch through the snow to the car.

‘Not much,’ Will replies, yanking open the passenger door and sinking into the seat, buckling himself in as Hannibal hurries around to the driver’s side. ‘Jack just said it was called in this morning, body’s been there a while, and that it isn’t pretty.’

Not like my tableaus.

Hannibal wonders if Will catches his thought – from the sudden, sharp glance his way, he thinks he may have, but he doesn’t want to ruin the mood by asking, and simply allows the soothing music of Brahms to fill the space between them. Will seems content to let the silence breathe, though he does engage in the odd snatch of conversation.

‘I’m opening a bottle of 1978 Chianti this evening,’ Hannibal says, slowing as they approach the flashing red and blue lights of the police cruisers surrounding the gas station. ‘Would you care to join me for dinner and a glass?’

‘What are you cooking?’ Will asks, holding up his new FBI ID badge for the officer on perimeter duty, his thoughts turning dark as the cop waves them through.

Or should I say “who”?

‘Beef tenderloin and tail of veal, with seasonal vegetables,’ Hannibal replies, ignoring the snide thought from his mate. He parks the Bentley beside Jack’s SUV and cuts the engine. ‘And a dark chocolate and blood orange syrup sponge for dessert.’

‘I’ll think about it,’ Will says, pausing midway through opening the door. He glances back over his shoulder, regarding Hannibal with narrowed eyes. ‘Tell you what; I’ll come to yours for dinner on two conditions.’

‘Hm?’ Hannibal smiles, intrigued, and his heart skips a beat at the playful sparkle in Will’s blue eyes.

‘Condition one: you wear your new hat today,’ Will says, to which Hannibal immediately nods and plucks the ridiculous thing from the glove compartment. He pulls it down onto his head and Will snorts, reaching out to straighten the flap so that it at least looks neat, if ugly as fuck with its fur-lined earflaps. ‘Okay,’ he relents, dropping his hand to Hannibal’s knee. ‘Condition two: I bring the dogs with me.’

When Hannibal tilts his head in puzzlement, Will leans in for a sudden, brief kiss, withdrawing before the Alpha is ready, and leaving Hannibal stunned. He climbs out of the car and tosses a grin over his shoulder, leaning back in to add,

‘Since I’ll be spending the night.’

And then the door is closing, and Hannibal has to hurry to unbuckle himself and get out. He slips and slides after Will, not caring that his smile is inappropriate for the situation, his chest tight with excitement at the promise that his mate will be sharing a bed with him. Sleeping and waking with him the next morning…

It's one step closer to him moving in with me.

His pleasant thoughts are interrupted, however, by the sight of the mauled body – or, more accurately, the body *parts* – strewn about the eighteen-wheeler. Blood has frozen and solidified into stalactites from blue-tinged hands, glinting like rubies on the windshield and melting back into discolored puddles as the sun thaws small patches around the yellow number tags.

Jimmy's camera shutter clicks furiously as he photographs every angle, capturing the details in high definition. Shattered fibula. Chunks of calf and thigh. A dozen vertebrae, frozen together…

Will looks around at the carnage and frowns.

'Since when did the FBI get involved in animal attacks, Jack?'

'When there's somebody holding the *leash* of whatever it is that's doing the killing,' Jack replies, frowning at him.

'Esophagus is destroyed!' Zeller calls, shouting back from the top of a yellow ladder propped against the truck's cabin, his voice whipped away by the wind almost as soon as it leaves his mouth. 'The bite almost severed his head!'

'Whatever it was, it's not afraid of humans,' Jack growls, shaking his head. 'Not anymore.'

'So, I'm thinking a bear or a wolf,' Jimmy says, looking up from the photos on his camera. He's bundled up in his own layers; thick scarf, windproof jacket and a deep hat that covers his ears. Jack's fedora is jammed low on his head, and his ears are protected with slim muffs. Hannibal's hat, having received raised eyebrows at first, is now getting the odd envious glance from the crime scene investigators around them, and Will is actually glad he told his Alpha to wear it. The winter air is brutal.

'Wolves or bears don't eat where they kill,' he says, chewing his lip in contemplation. 'They'd have dragged him off.'

'There's no eating here,' Zeller says, gesturing to the body. 'We're gonna find everything. Look, the viscera's exposed, the belly's laid bare… but there's no sign of rutting or gnawing, Jack.'

'A rabid animal attacks victims at random and doesn't eat any part of them,' Hannibal offers.

'Found the same wound patterns on a series of livestock mutilations in the area,' Jimmy says, thoughtful. 'Evisceration, dismemberment, yet everything accounted for.'

‘What, so, livestock mutilations… that was practice?’ Will frowns, confused by it all. He’s never known an animal to behave like this.

‘He’s gonna kill again.’ Jack snarls, his eyes flashing red. ‘He’s gonna get better at it.’

‘He’s *urbanizing* his animal,’ Will says, gazing up at the broken body of the trucker. ‘Moving it closer to the city… Adapting it for bigger prey…’

‘And he’s not denying its natural instincts,’ Hannibal adds, looking up when Will and Jack frown at him. ‘He’s evolving them.’

Jack sighs, and shakes his head in disgust.

‘It’s blood sport.’

They fall silent, watching as Price and Zeller continue to photograph and catalogue the evidence. Hannibal moves closer to Will when Jack strides away, and Will leans against him to share warmth as he spins an idea around his mind.

‘What are you thinking?’ Hannibal asks, his gaze lingering on the different shades of red as the sun hits blood-soaked snow.

‘I think we need to get an expert’s opinion on this,’ Will murmurs, absorbed by the way the thawing entrails spill pale liquid down the frosted windshield, cutting a path through older crimson streaks. ‘We need someone who understands animals.’

‘It might be difficult to arrange a visit so soon,’ Hannibal replies, already pulling his cell phone from his pocket. ‘But I’ll see what I can do.’

‘See what you can do about what?’ Jack asks, returning just as Hannibal raises the phone to his ear. Will nods for him to move away and takes Jack by the elbow, distracting him from the call.

‘I’m going to ask Peter Bernardone about the attacks,’ he says, nodding when Jack looks surprised. He shrugs. ‘He’s an expert in this field, and I’m sure he’d want to help.’

‘Hasn’t he been incarcerated at a local psychiatric hospital?’ Jack’s scowl deepens when Will nods, and he rubs the stubble on his cheeks. ‘Jesus, Will…’

Hannibal looks over, confirming their permission to visit, and Jack sighs again.

‘Alright,’ he says heavily, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. ‘Alright; go… Just… Keep his Alpha out of it, yeah?’

Will’s expression darkens.

‘Oh, I have *no* intention of including Clark Ingram in *anything*,’ he spits. Jack nods.

‘And you know where he is? Which hospital he’s at?’

Will feels Hannibal's hand on his, and automatically links their fingers together, even though Jack is right in front of them. He gives his Alpha a squeeze, grateful for the support, and squares his shoulders.

'He's at the Port Haven Psychiatric Facility.'

Jack frowns, the name familiar.

'Isn't what where –?'

'Yeah.' Will swallows, turning his gaze away from both Alphas. 'Yeah; it's where Abigail was.'

One of the last places I saw her alive.

***

Of the options for his incarceration, Port Haven is probably the best for Peter. There are other Omegas here, both patients and on the staff, and he's allowed to spend most of his time in the Day Room, which is flooded with light from the big windows and softened by a forest of potted plants in every corner.

This was where I convinced Abigail to come to Minnesota with me… Where I triggered the chain of events that led to Hannibal killing her.

Will's heart feels two sizes too small in his chest when he first enters the room. He looks around, his throat clogged with a miserable lump, and tries not to think about the last time he was here. Before everything went to shit… Before his own imprisonment…

At least the uniforms here are nicer, he thinks, picking his way through the dazed or sedated patients to the Omega hunched over himself in an armchair at the far end of the room. Abigail, as a voluntary patient, had been allowed to wear her own clothes, but everyone else is dressed in pastel yellow jumpsuits stamped with their ID number. A reminder that they are wardens of the State just as much as any prisoner.

'Hey, Peter.' Will forces himself to smile when he stops in front of the other Omega. In the few days since his arrest, Peter Bernardone seems even more frail, and Will feels the familiar urge to pull the trigger and shatter Clark Ingram's head with a bullet.

'H-h-hi, W-Will.' Peter nods quickly, a nervous tick, and then returns to stroking his arm, seeking some small comfort in his own touch. Nausea swirls in Will's gut, but he forces it down and settles himself in the armchair beside Peter. He's left Hannibal in the car, since Peter has always responded favorably to just him, and so as not to alert Clark. An Omegan visitor has no need to sign in – they're clearly not a threat. But an Alpha would require the Guardian's permission to attend.

Discrimination at its finest.

'How are you?' Will asks, scanning Peter's face for signs of bruising or other distress. The smaller Omega shrugs, golden eyes on his knees, and Will sighs. It's a shitty thing to do; to

come here so soon after his incarceration and ask him to look at crime scene photographs, but he doesn't know what else to do.

'I could use your help… I was wondering if you felt up to looking at some photos of an animal attack,' Will murmurs, pulling out the file as he speaks. He waits for Peter to nod, as he knows he will, and then places the less severe images on the table before him. Two pictures of the dead man's throat, beside tape measures showing the size of the bite marks. 'A wolf or a bear?'

Peter looks down, and Will realizes that it's not his own arm that he's stroking, but a little rat tucked inside his jumpsuit. The rodent's face tilts up, its nose twitching and dark eyes bright with curiosity as it gazes at Will.

'*Oh!'* Will laughs, and Peter lets the rat climb towards the safety of his elbow.

'Th- this… this is K-Kevin,' the Omega explains, petting his companion. 'Uh… try not to… to stare,' he whispers, looking around for orderlies. 'Or they'll… they'll t-take him a-a*way* from me.'

'Oh, right… sorry.' Will nods, and returns his attention to the photos. He waits for Peter to set the little rat down beside him on the chair and then watches as the Omega turns his face away and closes his eyes, pointing to one photo after the other.

'Bear. Wolf.'

Will frowns. Both?

'*Do* bears and wolves hunt together?'

'Um, you… you can train a bear to be a wolf,' Peter explains, eyes skittering around all over the place. 'Or… or a wolf to be a bear… Train… Train 'em long enough and they… they will hunt together… f-feed together… Feed together…' He trails away, nodding to himself. Notices that Kevin the rat is walking along the edge of the armchair and scoops him up, tucking him back into his sleeve. He leans towards Will and gives him a knowing smile. 'E-nough t-time… there's a great deal I could train even y-*you* to do, Will.'

Train you to kill… To think you like killing.

Will's stomach clenches, and he quirks his lips as he hums his agreement.

'That kind of friendship can… keep you on your *toes*.'

I bet Clark Ingram kept you on your toes, too.

Peter watches as Will starts to put the pictures away, jerking his head to the side and closing his eyes so that he can gesture to the image.

'Animals… they… they *do* have… they have friendships… just, er… just like us.' He pulls Kevin the rat back out before the little creature can burrow into the armchair and pets him,

purring softly to soothe him. ‘We’re the same,’ he croons, his eyes flashing gold as he fusses his companion.

We’re the same.

Will thinks of his own prison jumpsuit, with his own number stamped across the front. Thinks of Hannibal, and the darkness crawling inside his veins. Two parts of himself; the Omega and the killer… The same.

He wets his lips, his mouth suddenly dry.

‘Yeah, I’ll er, I’ll try to remember that.’

‘Please… don’t… don’t b-blame… blame the animals,’ Peter whispers, tears shimmering in his eyes. ‘M-man is the… the only c-creature that k-kills to… to kill.’

The words resonate, and Will smells his scent change as his shadow rears within him. Ash and smoke, like the burning of autumn leaves, fill his nose, laced with the sweet taste of sugar.

The livestock and truck driver weren’t killed for food… They were killed for the pleasure of killing. Blood sport, Jack had said…

Man is the only creature that kills to kill.

***

The whirring of a saw cuts the still air inside his workshop. Scents clamor for his attention – metal, oil and bone, as well as the thick taste of Rutting Alpha – but he focuses on the task at hand. Under the harsh glare of the fluorescent lights, the skull of the great beast before him looks eerily pale, its cavernous sockets filled with shadows.

The Alpha slots the final tooth into place beside a row of sharp incisors and screws it tightly into the skull so that it won’t fall out. It is a polymer replica of a saber cat fang, three-inches long and as wide as two fingers.

On the table behind him, a steel-lined ribcage waits to be hooked into the harness hanging from the back of the skull. For now, the straps dangle, the buckles gleaming and leather soft with polish.

The Alpha sprays lubricant into the gears of the skull, and then attaches two pipes to the pressurized air-tank on the floor by his feet. He slots the remote control into his hand and retrieves a piece of wood from the desk. It’s about the width of a man’s forearm, and should be a good test for the crushing power of his upgrade.

One press of the lever, and the jaws snap shut. The wood shatters and splinters fall to the floor, no bigger than his finger.

The Alpha purrs, his eyes glowing crimson.

It’s time to hunt.

***

Bonfires have been lit within the grounds of the Mayor’s estate, the flames crackling cheerfully in the darkness as guests disperse from the ballroom to enjoy a moonlit walk in the snow. Amongst them is a newly-wed couple, Martin and Anna Whitmore-Granger, their clothes a tad worse for wear after an evening of dancing.

‘You know; we could do more than just *walk*,’ Martin purrs, leaning in to nuzzle and kiss his mate’s cheek.

Anna chuckles, giving him a playful nudge before slipping her hand beneath the warmth of his coat to settle on his hip. She’s wearing a gorgeous silk and chiffon dress, the flimsy material currently hidden beneath the thick white fur of her coat and matching hat. It complements Martin’s scarf, and his evening coat is an extravagant affair of velvet and mink. The outfits are wedding gifts from each other, meant for their upcoming trip to see the Northern Lights. The coats shouldn’t really be out of their boxes, but they couldn’t resist a little indulgence.

They can’t really resist anything.

‘You’re impossible,’ Anna whispers, grinning as Martin leans in to kiss her. It starts slow, a gentle press and parting of lips, but she can smell his scent thickening, smoky with desire, and her own body quickens at his touch.

There’s no-one around, after all. They could –

Something bursts from the thicket, startling them into turning around. There’s a moment, a brief, beautiful second, where Anna thinks it might be a deer, and then it’s on them.

It’s huge. A grotesque misshapen monster, like something out of a horror movie. It might be a bear, or a wolf, but there’s something very, very wrong with it.

Martin shoves her, trying to protect her, and he takes the full force of the first blow. He falls with a cry, the breath knocked from his lungs as he lands, and Anna runs. She doesn’t want to, but her legs are carrying her before she can stop herself. Fear is a living thing inside her, making her heart batter against her ribcage and sharpening her senses until the night pales around her.

The *thing* is on Martin, and it’s huge. Bare bones gleam, and it punches and rips its way through him, spraying blood everywhere. Its eyes glow like hot coals, and a snarl rumbles from deep inside its skull as it shoves him down to get a better grip.

Anna’s dress tangles around her ankles and she falls in a heap, her teeth clacking together and nose breaking on a hidden stone. Pain flares, hot and bright, and she tastes copper. Her ears are ringing, but she can still hear Martin’s dying scream. It comes with the snap of splintering bone, the sickening rip of tearing flesh, and a dull thud as a severed limb is tossed from his body.

His body. Just a body, now… Not a person; not her husband. A body.

We were supposed to go on holiday.

She can hear it coming for her. It's too fast; there's no way she can get away. Anna turns, surprised by her own calm, and stares into the face of her death.

It's an Alpha.

***

He knows he's dreaming, but Will can tell that snippets of this conversation are from his memory. He's back in his prison cell, his body scratched by the cheap jumpsuit, his feet freezing in thin sneakers. Hannibal is on the other side of the bars, just close enough that Will can feel his warmth, but he can't get to him.

'Chilton told me you are now under his *exclusive* care,' Hannibal says, his voice rasping with a snarl. 'Were you lying when you said you wanted my help, Will?'

'*No.'* Will curls his hands around the cold iron of the bars, huffing in frustration. 'I… I saw something… Chilton gave me a narco-analytic, on top of nuchal stimulation.'

He sees Hannibal's eyes flare red, his mate furious at the idea of another Alpha manipulating his crest. Will whines, lowering his head to display the side of his neck, and Hannibal closes the distance even more.

'I saw you… injecting me… Bracing me… It felt so real… It was… It was like looking at a *memory*,' Will whispers, enticing his Alpha to believe him with his scent and the distress in his tone. 'Why is he doing this to me?'

'He's trying to alienate us,' Hannibal growls, pitching his voice low so as not to be picked up by the monitors. 'You don't know what you can trust to be true.'

I never have.

As Will opens his mouth to reply, a shrill buzzing cuts through the scene. It starts as the unlocking of the cell door, but then it changes as the dream gives way to waking. Will rolls over, vaguely aware of the sheets rustling beside him, and reaches blindly for the source of the noise, trying to clear his fuzzy vision. What's making that noise? An alarm clock? A glass of fireflies?

'Hello, Jack.'

Hannibal gets to the cell phone first, and Will subsides with a mumbled thanks, snuggling down into the covers as sleep steals back over him.

'Hannibal; I was expecting Will.' Jack Crawford sounds both surprised and suspicious, and Hannibal smirks even as he blinks himself awake.

‘He’s asleep,’ he says, swinging his bare legs out into the cold air. The fire burned itself out hours ago, and the heating can only do so much to chase away the winter chill. ‘How may I help you?’

‘I er, I was hoping Will would come to a crime scene with me,’ Jack says, suitably sheepish. ‘There’s been another animal attack, and I could do with his perspective.’

‘I’ll let him know,’ Hannibal says, looking fondly down at his mate. ‘I assume my presence is not required?’

‘Unless you’re free?’ Jack replies, sounding distracted. There’s a rush of static, a poor connection, and Hannibal moves the cell from his ear. Jack must be at the scene, already; the signal is weak.

‘I’m afraid not. I’ll wake Will now.’

‘Appreciate it.’

Hannibal ends the call and sets the little phone down on the bedside table. He has no intention of waking Will just yet, no matter what he said. They had a late night and it’s early, still. Following dinner and a glass of the Chianti, he had endured one of Will’s favorite movies after teaching him to play the harpsichord, and they hadn’t retired to bed until past midnight. Though it *had* been surprisingly pleasant to stretch out on the couch before the television, with three small dogs lying on their entwined legs and the rest asleep before the fire.

Thinking of the dogs, Hannibal collects a pair of pajama pants and his blue dress robe, summoning the pack from their rug before the empty bedroom hearth. They crowd around him, wagging their tails and yawning loudly. Buster launches himself for the bed, but is unable to get purchase and rebounds with a surprised yip. Will mutters something and reaches for his dogs, making Hannibal frown at the inconsiderate little animal.

‘We’ll be right back,’ he murmurs, leaning down to stroke his mate’s curling hair, and press a gentle kiss his forehead. ‘Sleep, my love. I’m just letting the dogs out.’

‘Hmm… ‘kay.’

Hannibal ushers the dogs from the master bedroom, firmly shutting the door behind him so as not to disturb his Omega again. He leads the way downstairs and sends the animals out into the snow-covered backyard, preparing the espresso machine before replacing slippers for boots in order to go out and clean up after them.

‘If you were *my* dogs, you’d live in kennels,’ he tells them, absently fussing Winston’s head when the collie-cross sits beside him. ‘What would Will say to that, hm? Would he despise me?’ He dumps the little baggies into the garbage bin and returns to the kitchen to thoroughly wash his hands, counting off the pack one by one to make sure they are all back inside, tracking the dirty pawprints crisscrossing his floor.

‘Look at the *state* of you…’ Hannibal rolls his eyes, and goes to fetch an old towel from the pantry. When Will had insisted on bringing the dogs, he had prepared a selection of old blankets and towels in anticipation of mess, and now he crouches by the mat to dry off each dog, nuzzling Jack-Dog and Bruce when they snuffle his jaw.

A purr cuts the quiet, and all seven dogs abandon Hannibal in their haste to greet Will. The Omega is stood in the kitchen doorway, golden-eyed and sleep-tousled, staring in awe at the way his Alpha is fussing over his dogs.

Hannibal blushes, wiping his hands off on the towel and folding it as he gets back to his feet.

‘Do they always get so dirty?’ he asks, attempting to compose himself as he washes his hands again. ‘I was hoping to bring you breakfast in bed.’

‘It’s not Sunday,’ Will replies. He crosses the room, the silk of his own pajama pants whispering against his legs. He had discovered the leisurewear in his half of Hannibal’s dresser, and thrown on a t-shirt and burgundy robe on his way down to find his missing partner. ‘Did I dream the phone ringing?’

‘It was Jack,’ Hannibal says, handing him a cup of freshly brewed coffee. ‘He has requested your presence at a crime scene. Another attack.’

‘I’ll have to drop the dogs off, first,’ Will says, closing his eyes with pleasure at the taste of the coffee. ‘Mmm… I’d forgotten how much I love this blend.’

‘I’ll take the dogs back for you,’ Hannibal says, stirring sugar into his own drink with a smirk. ‘Wouldn’t want to keep Uncle Jack waiting too long, would we?’

‘Wouldn’t want *that*.’ Will grins, and moves around the counter to cuddle up beside his mate. ‘This is nice, isn’t it?’

‘Very domestic,’ Hannibal agrees, smiling down at him. There’s a crackle of tension, a hint of nervousness from them both, and Will sighs around the rim of his cup.

‘Do you think we could have this?’ he asks, staring into the depths of his drink as he speaks. ‘Even after everything that’s happened?’

‘I hope so,’ Hannibal murmurs, thinking once more of his plans to take Will to Europe. His prickly little mate just needs time to work through his emotional response to the last few months, and for their bond to strengthen to the point of true unity.

Until then, Hannibal will give him whatever he needs. As Will steps away, he lets his hand drop, giving him space. No doubt the other man is feeling vulnerable after such an intimate evening together.

I don’t know what I can trust to be true.

‘Thanks for sorting the dogs,’ Will mutters, draining the last of his mug. When he sets it down, he lets his fingers brush the side of Hannibal’s hand, just for a second, and lists a fraction closer before dragging himself away. ‘I should get ready.’

‘Of course.’ Hannibal is careful to conceal his disappointment from both their bond and his expression, and is rewarded with Will’s hesitation, debate, and then a fleeting kiss to the lips.

‘Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing,’ Will whispers, hugging Hannibal tight before withdrawing. ‘I’m wise to your games, remember.’

Hannibal grins, his eyes gleaming as he watches Will take an apple from the fruit bowl on his way from the room.

I shall have to change the rules, then.

***

It’s a fraction warmer than the other day, and Will doesn’t bother with a hat this time. He greets a somber-looking Jack at the edge of the yellow tape, and follows him through a thicket of trees to the latest display of brutality.

It looks like a battlefield. The man has been ripped apart, his body scattered into five, no, six, pieces around the charcoal remains of a bonfire. The woman faired a little better – she is, at least, intact – just with her throat torn out.

The violence is… overwhelming. Will can feel himself swaying on the spot as he looks around, the chill of the air kept at bay by the dark fire licking through his veins.

The current rises, dragging him down before he’s really ready for it. Shadows swarm behind his eyes, blinding him, and the pendulum swings.

Three, two, one.

He’s there.

I stalked you. Hunted you. My prey.

The *need* is overwhelming, but his heartbeat is slow and steady.

Thud-thump. Thud-thump. Thud-thump.

He’s so *alive*. So *whole*.

Resonances hang in the air, like a shimmering trail of breadcrumbs. The pendulum turns back time, undoing the damage so he can see it for himself.

So he can *do* it himself.

Perfect snow. Perfect whiteness.

My canvas.

The pyre reassembles, and flames lick high into the night. There are a dozen of them, lit for the enjoyment of the guests.

His prey wander closer to the warmth, giggling and petting each other. They are recently mated; he can tell by their scent, and distracted by each other.

Good.

Will closes his eyes. He waits, listening to the crackle of fire and the crunch of snow under the Beta and Alpha's feet.

When he looks, he's peering through the branches of trees. Safely hidden in the shadows. He doesn't move; doesn't falter. Just watches as his prey moves into position.

Beside him, the Ravenstag snorts. It tosses its magnificent head, ebony antlers gleaming in the darkness. It is hungry; it wants to feed. It needs the violence to survive.

Will feels his eyes prickle, senses them glow gold, and a purr rattles his chest.

It's time.

'Kill.'

The order leaves his lips and the stag charges. It gallops for the couple, kicking up a flurry of snow in its wake, and lowers its head to batter into them. Blood sprays as razor antlers pierce flesh, and they both scream as they are knocked flying.

But it's not like this… It's not the *stag* doing this… Will can *feel* the give of muscle and bone between his own teeth. He can feel the weakening struggles as the woman dies beneath his clawed hands, and taste her meat in his mouth as he tears out her throat. And, when he lifts his head to howl at the night sky, to cry his victory like the Alphas of old, his own antlers drip crimson.

He is the Ravenstag. *He* is the beast.

He comes back to himself with a jolt, shivering in the aftermath of the reconstruction. It felt so real. So *good*… There was a familiarity in the violence that spoke to him, that whispered comfort…

'It's not an animal,' he mutters, frowning down at the stiff corpse of the woman he *remembers* killing. 'It's a man who wants to *be* an animal.'

Snow crunches under Jack's boots, and the Alpha sighs as he comes back to stand beside the Omega, reviewing the mess of death before them. This case has just become more complicated, and therefore more difficult to solve. Not good for the department stats.

'Does he believe he's an animal?'

'It's not what he believes,' Will replies, frowning at the intricacy of the problem. 'It's what he *imagines*.'

And anything we can imagine, we can create.

‘Well, what does he *want?’* Jack demands, frustration tinging his voice with a snarl. He’s so sick of these crazy motherfuckers.

‘He wants to maul.’ Will turns to him as he speaks, offering a small shrug at the answer. ‘Nothing personal about this. He doesn’t know them. He doesn’t need to know them. They’re just… *meat* to him. Prey.’

Like pigs. *God, this is what Hannibal is capable of.*

Jack doesn’t say anything, but Will gets the distinct impression that his mind also went to the Chesapeake Ripper. The wrong man, of course, but the Ripper nonetheless.

‘This kind of psychosis doesn’t just slip through the system,’ the Alpha growls, walking Will back across the crime scene to the dead Beta male. ‘Someone, *somewhere* would have noticed this.’

‘If it *is* psychosis then he got inside of it, somehow,’ Will replies, sidestepping a puddle of blood and a severed hand. ‘Tamed it… Made a suit out of it…’ He looks down to where Zeller is crouched beside the limb, making notes on incision depth and wound patterns. ‘He’s an engineer,’ Will continues, piecing together the feel of weight against his skin when he’d been killing the woman. ‘Or he understands engineering…’

I heard air… A pressurized jaw?

‘He knows how to build.’ He nods, confirming the facts for himself, understanding the smell of grease from the reconstruction. ‘He *built* his beast.’

I made every part of it… The perfect killing machine.

‘He is a *student* of predators,’ Will purrs, his eyes glowing golden as he looks out over his bloodshed. ‘And now he’s a master hunter.’

Just like the Alphas of old.

***

With Hannibal’s schedule filled for the day, Will returns to Wolf Trap to walk the dogs and have lunch by himself. He also writes a quick ad for the local newspaper, offering boat engine and mechanical repair services, and pays for a month’s run. His pension from the Academy won’t cover all the bills, and he has no intention of relying on Hannibal for any financial support, now or in the future.

He does, however, want to use the Alpha as a sounding board for his theories about the killer, so he times his drive to arrive at Baltimore for just after six o’clock, when Hannibal’s last patient will have left, and he will be alone in the office. Parking his Volvo beside the gleaming Bentley, he sheds his coat, gloves and scarf on his way to the foyer and finds Hannibal already waiting in the doorway for him, maroon eyes gleaming and lips curving into the smile he reserves just for him.

‘Hello, Will.’

‘Were the dogs good for you?’ Will asks, allowing a quick kiss before ducking inside. ‘They don’t all travel well.’

‘They were fine.’ Hannibal closes the door behind them and hangs Will’s coat up, gesturing for him to make himself comfortable. ‘Would you like to talk?’

‘Just rattling some ideas,’ Will replies, rolling up his shirtsleeves as he wanders around to Hannibal’s desk. ‘It was an, er, *interesting* crime scene.’

‘Was it reminiscent of the truck driver?’ Hannibal asks, tidying away his sterling silver fountain pen and pulling his stack of patient notes towards him. The top book is still open, black ink glistening on the velum pages, and Will’s eyes skate over the swirling letters before he can stop himself.

‘Worse, in a way.’ The Omega rubs his arms, grateful for the ever-constant fire in the hearth, and moves to lean against the front of the desk, with his back to the books, so as not to be tempted by them. ‘It’s not an animal attack. It’s a person hiding *behind* an animal mask.’

At last…

Hannibal’s chest tightens, and he hides the flash of proud crimson in his eyes by keeping his gaze lowered, ostensibly to tidy up his desk after a busy day.

‘No beast is more savage than man, when possessed with power answerable to his own rage,’ he says, matching his heartbeat to the tick of his desk clock. Controlling the excitement because he knows *exactly* who is responsible for the attacks.

‘It’s not rage,’ Will replies, shaking his head at the *wrongness* of the explanation. ‘Rage is an emotional response to being provoked. This is… something else.’

‘What is it?’ Hannibal asks, still refusing to look at Will. To betray his former student.

‘Instinct.’ Will’s voice is low; barely more than a whisper, and he looks over his shoulder as he speaks, forcing Hannibal to glance up. ‘It’s the way he *thinks*,’ Will adds, a layer of understanding to his tone that Hannibal is certain would not be there were he talking to Jack about this. But here, in this space, they can be honest with one another.

Here, Will can accept that a part of him is *jealous* of the killer’s freedom.

‘The way any animal thinks depends on limitations of mind and body.’ Hannibal shrugs, and closes the last book, certain that the ink has finally dried. ‘If we learn our limitations too soon, we never learn our power.’

You learned your limitations too soon, my love.

Will flinches at the silent rebuke, his eyes flooding gold.

‘His victims were torn apart; I’d say he learned his power,’ he snaps. Hannibal watches him look away, glaring across the room, and abandons his books to offer silent comfort to his mate.

‘He *claimed* his power,’ he explains. When Will raises an eyebrow at this, still braced with one hand on either side of him, Hannibal purrs, just once, and unbuttons his suit jacket. He comes to sit beside his Omega, copying the other man’s position, but clasps his hands before him, projecting an air of relaxed confidence. ‘Can you *imagine* tearing someone apart?’ he murmurs. A pause, and then, ‘Or would you prefer to use a gun?’

Will snorts, and rolls his eyes.

‘Guns lack *intimacy*.’

‘You set an event into motion with a gun,’ Hannibal agrees. ‘You don’t complete it.’ He looks down at his own palms, and continues, ‘You fantasized about killing me with your hands. Wouldn’t that be more satisfying than pulling a trigger?’

Will considers the question, and his scent thickens with the sweet, smoky tone of arousal.

‘*Yes*.’

Hannibal nods, and gives his mate a moment to settle once again. When a little of the tension drains from Will’s frame, he speaks in a muted tone, inviting confidence.

‘When you sent a man to kill me, were you imagining killing me yourself? Living vicariously through him, as if *your* hands tightened the noose around my neck? Or were you simply hiding?’

Were you being a typical Omega… manipulative and, ultimately, cowardly?

Will doesn’t growl, but his jaw clenches until a muscle jumps, his eyes equal parts blue and gold.

‘I wasn’t hiding from anything the *first* time I tried to kill you.’

‘You were hiding,’ Hannibal argues, raising an eyebrow when Will glares at him. ‘Behind the gun.’

Will turns away and Hannibal smirks, his eyes burning red with victory. Will resents relying on a weapon, or another Alpha. If Hannibal can needle him enough, it might breed the right kind of action.

Time for a little suggestion.

‘You must allow yourself to be intimate with your instincts, Will.’ He pitches his tone with just a hint of Alpha purr, strengthening his Omega’s urge to comply, and then looks at him, very deliberately taking his hand and pressing a kiss to the knuckles. ‘Let them guide you.’

Just as this Alpha’s instincts are guiding him.

Will hums, and uses the grip to pull Hannibal a step closer, until his Alpha is stood between his knees.

‘Are you intimate with your instincts?’ he asks, tilting his face up as Hannibal dips his head for a kiss.

‘Always,’ Hannibal whispers, breathing the words into his mate’s soft lips. He abandons Will’s hand to run his fingers through his Omega’s curls, tangling his fist at the base of Will’s skull and using the grip to deepen the kiss.

Will hums his pleasure at the show of dominance, and slides his hands down Hannibal’s chest to settle on his waist. He scooches back onto the desk and spreads his legs, holding Hannibal closer as the kiss becomes more intense.

‘Come to my house tonight,’ he mutters, spreading his palms across Hannibal’s hips to soak up the heat from his skin. ‘Spend the night with me.’

‘I’d love to,’ Hannibal replies, kissing his way from Will’s pink lips, across the dusting of beard on his cheek, up to his temple. ‘I have to stop by Quantico first, but I’ll come straight after.’

‘Yeah, you will.’ Will grins at his own innuendo, drawing Hannibal back in for another round of kissing and tongue-sucking, relishing the crackling arousal between them, and the hot ache in his balls. It’s a good feeling, and one that he cherishes.

Hannibal closes his eyes, celebrating the sound, smell and feel of his mate beneath his hands. Will’s hair is luxuriously soft under his fingers, and his skin burns with his touch. When he kisses him, he tastes blood, chocolate and smoke, a heady mix like wildfire and sugar. Like *home*. He wants nothing more than to open his own ribcage and keep Will’s heart alongside his own, to consume him, utterly, and keep him safe from the savagery of the world.

‘Hah! Hannibal!’ Will laughs when his Alpha sucks a livid bruise into the side of his throat, moaning softly at how *good* it feels, but he squirms away before the teeth can pierce his flesh. He’s already making a damp patch in his boxers, and he doesn’t want to leave a stain on the expensive desk. ‘Not here,’ he gasps, his breathing unsteady and legs tingling. ‘We… we should wait.’

‘Should?’ Hannibal gives him a wicked grin, and Will feels lightning zing up his spine. He quivers, his erection straining against the zipper of his pants and slick making his ass cheeks rub together. Pushing off from the desk, he rubs himself up against the answering hardness in Hannibal’s suit, and wraps his arms tight around his shoulders.

‘I love how you make me feel.’

‘I want to devour you,’ Hannibal whispers, cupping each side of Will’s face and plundering his mouth again and again. ‘I want to know every part of you, *mylimasis.’*

Will nods, and takes one of Hannibal’s gorgeous hands in his own. After kissing the palm, he locks eyes with his Alpha and licks a deliberate stripe up the underside of his forefinger, swirling his tongue over the tip before taking the entire length of the digit into his hot cavern of his mouth, sucking hard.

Hannibal bucks forward, pleasure coiling like a spring in his belly, his senses heightened by pleasure. At Will's tug, he slides his hand around to the nape of his Omega's neck, slipping beneath the collar of his shirt to cover the swollen ridges of his crest.

'F-*fuck*…' Will closes his eyes, his back arching and hips jumping forwards at the touch on his most sensitive part. Waves of pleasure ripple through him, radiating heat down his spine, and a desperate *need* drowns out every other thought from his brain. 'Hannibal… *Hannibal*…'

'Do you want to bond me, Will?' Hannibal kisses him again, giving his Omega's crest another gentle squeeze as he asks the question. He smirks at the feel of Will's answering shudder, uncaring that his suit is being wrinkled by the white-knuckled grip Will has on his sleeves. 'Do you want to bite me?'

'*Yes*,' Will breathes, tears running freely down his cheeks now as he gazes into his Alpha's face. He bares his own throat and lets Hannibal bend him backwards, utterly trusting in his mate's grasp, purring softly when Hannibal nuzzles his thundering pulse.

'Will you say that you're mine?' Hannibal asks, pressing the words into Will's neck even as his Omega tangles his fingers in his own hair.

'Yes,' Will promises, and, just as suddenly as he'd surrendered, he rears up, shoving Hannibal back towards the armchair and straddling him with a knee between his legs, claiming his mouth in a messy, brutal kiss. 'When you're *mine*.'

Hannibal barks a laugh, shocked by the sudden turn of events. He hugs Will to his chest, grabbing his hair again to wrench his head back, preventing Will from biting his throat before he's ready.

'You'll have to fight me,' he pants, gazing into his mate's ferocious gold stare. 'And win.'

'I will,' Will snarls, struggling against the hold. 'I'll make you *beg* for it.'

Hannibal laughs again, his hips bucking at the idea of it. He risks the pain of a bite to rub his thumb over Will's lower lip, and moans at the feel of small Omegan fangs puncturing his skin.

Will suckles on his Alpha's blood, purring softly as a strong hand massages his crest. It's a calming motion, squeezing the second and third ridges, and his body responds to the Gentling by releasing floods of endorphins. He sags, boneless and sated even without a climax, and nestles himself against Hannibal's chest, content to nuzzle and kiss his Alpha's jawline, without the need to bite.

'That's cheating,' he whispers, but he's grinning as he says it. He'd had no intention of really fighting Hannibal for the right to Pair Bond him now; this is flirting, a new game being developed between them as their relationship evolves. When he's truly ready to bite his Alpha, Hannibal stands no chance.

‘What did you expect?’ Hannibal replies, smiling back at him. They share a deep, tender kiss, lips and tongues parting and surrendering as chests tighten and loosen in a harmony of rumbling purrs, and Will rests his forehead against Hannibal’s when they finally part for air.

‘Sensitive psychopath,’ he teases, dropping a kiss to the tip of his Alpha’s nose. ‘You’d better not be this soppy when you fuck me tonight.’

Hannibal bares his teeth in a hungry smile, and his eyes glow crimson.

‘I assure you, beloved; if you want me to savage you, I will.’

Will shivers, and cups each side of Hannibal’s face.

‘I do,’ he breathes, tilting his hips forward enticingly. ‘I’m not a fragile little teacup.’

Hannibal trembles, his hands unsteady where he holds Will’s arms. Will smiles, and eases out of his grip, straightening himself out somewhat unsuccessfully before extending an offer to help his partner to his feet.

‘You won’t break me, Hannibal.’ He pulls his Alpha close, and winds a hand around the silk of his tie, holding him still. ‘I’m a lot stronger than you give me credit for.’

Hannibal leans in, submitting to Will’s hold on him, and gives his Omega one final kiss.

‘I know *exactly* how strong you are, *mylimasis*.’

I’m just not sure I know how strong I am, anymore.

***

‘The closest comparative bite radius we could match to the victims’ wounds is a cave bear.’

Jack listens to Brian’s explanation, his reading glasses perched on the end of his nose and forensic report open on his lap. It’s late, but they’re still in the lab and, until they get a hit on DNA samples or come up with a lead for the killer, it’s doubtful they’ll be getting home any time soon.

Zeller pats the reconstructed skull as he speaks, and then leans on it, making its jaw shut with a click, as Jimmy takes over from him.

‘Even the dire wolf, which is the largest species of the genus *Canis*, is itty-bitty by comparison.’ He gestures to the smaller skull on the stand in front of him, and shakes his head fondly.

‘But, a cave bear did *not* do this,’ Zeller says, a knowing look on his face as he shakes his finger at Jack.

‘Mostly because they’re vegetarian,’ Jimmy says, though he shrugs at the additional pointed finger he gets from Zeller, and adds an apparently more important fact. ‘*And* have been extinct for 28,000 years.’

‘*Mostly* because the bite force relative to the skull size doesn’t match the kind of damage we’ve been seeing,’ Zeller explains.

Jack, wishing he’d thought to get a double-shot of espresso in his last coffee, sighs at the blurring lines on the page before him, and drops the file onto the table between them.

‘What could?’

‘Er, pull ratchets and pneumatics, maybe,’ Zeller suggests. Jack returns his glasses to the inner pocket of his suit jacket, and pinches the bridge of his nose.

‘Pretty sophisticated ingenuity for any kind of animal; man *or* beast.’

Unnoticed by the two Betas and distracted Alpha, Hannibal enters the Behavioral Science lab with his coat under his arm and visitor’s badge on his lapel. He’s neatened himself off since Will’s departure from his office, and wearing scent-suppressing deodorant in addition to an extra spray of cologne, to mask the lingering traces of arousal.

‘Animals are far more like humans than we ever realized,’ he says, by way of introduction. Jack, expecting him, doesn’t even look up from his contemplation, and Hannibal comes closer, eyeing the skulls curiously. ‘And humans are far more like animals. One thin barrier between us.’

‘For some, that barrier is way too thin,’ Jack growls. He pushes up from the table and turns to shake hands with his guest. ‘Hello, Dr Lecter.’ He nods to the skulls and autopsy file. ‘How does something like *this* present?’

What kind of crazy is he?

‘Someone affected by this kind of species dysphoria typically has other conditions,’ Hannibal replies, choosing his words carefully. ‘Mood disorders, clinical depression… schizophrenia.’

‘Typically?’ Jack glares at him, irritated by the generalization. Hannibal merely shrugs, and turns a mild gaze on him.

‘They may not present at all,’ he says. ‘Your killer could have built a bridge between who he appears to be, and what he now knows he’s become.’

‘He didn’t build a *bridge*, Doctor.’ Jack shakes his head in disgust. ‘He built a *suit*.’

Hannibal gazes at the animal skulls, marveling at the perfect sharpness of the teeth, and the places where muscles would give strength to the crushing jaws.

‘What he seeks is transformation,’ he murmurs, pride swelling until his chest feels tight.

He is becoming.

Jack, frustrated by his fellow Alpha’s apparent respect for their latest serial killer, heaves another sigh.

‘Have you ever seen anything like this before?’

Hannibal, to his surprise, glances at Brian and Jimmy and then strides into the other room, where technicians are categorizing tissue samples from the latest victims. Jack follows, staying close by so as to keep their voices down.

‘This threatens to be a violation of doctor-patient confidentiality,’ Hannibal says, feigning more hesitation than he feels. ‘So, I will tread carefully.’

He sees the hook dangle, watches as Jack’s eyes flicker red, and then the other Alpha takes the bait.

‘You’ve seen something like this.’

‘Years ago, I treated a patient who fits the profile,’ Hannibal admits. ‘A teenage boy, newly presented as Alpha, who suffered from what *I* would describe as an identity disorder.’

‘This boy fancied himself a beast,’ Jack guesses, shaking his head at the madness of it. Hannibal neither confirms nor denies the accusation; merely adds,

‘During our therapy, he reported a moment of clarity.’ He glances at Jack. ‘He understood, in that moment, that he was an animal, born in the body of a man. A Primal, just like the Alphas of old.’

Jack nods, sickened by the idea, and looks away at the remnants of human beings laid out on autopsy tables all around them, because of one boy’s fantasy.

‘He kept a solitary life,’ Hannibal continues, shrugging delicately. ‘He would hide and behave in ways resembling animal behavior.’

‘He was delusional,’ Jack says, but Hannibal shakes his head.

‘Not necessarily. He didn’t believe that metamorphosis could *physically* take place, but that wouldn’t stop him from trying to achieve it.’

He built his beast.

Jack nods; Will’s words echoing in his mind.

‘He’d be a grown man, now?’ he checks, and Hannibal nods.

‘And, as he grew in wisdom and confidence, he would no longer feel he had to meet his needs in hiding.’

Jack narrows his eyes, the rings of red thickening as he prepares to chase his quarry.

‘What are his needs, Dr Lecter?’

Hannibal considers the question, and all that it implies. He thinks of his own urges, and Will’s darkness. They are equally alike, the three of them.

A purr threatens to rattle his chest, but he keeps it suppressed. Nonetheless, a flicker of red shows in his eyes, and he smells Jack's scent sharpen at the sight of it. As Alphas, they understand the instincts of a killer only too well.

'Savagery. Much like any predator, he needs to hunt, and maul, and kill. It's his instinct.'

And he is as intimate with his instincts as I am with mine.

***

The air is still inside the Museum of Natural History. It is late, but Randall Tier likes working through the night. He likes being alone in the dark.

Moving carefully, he slots the freshly cleaned skull of a saber-tooth cat back onto the bracket of the display stand, his latex-gloved hands gentle with the prehistoric bone and ceramic replicas. As he works, he becomes aware of another Alpha approaching. The scent is muted, subtle beneath a tasteful cologne of cloves and cedarwood, the footsteps balanced and measured.

He is familiar.

'Museum's closed,' Randall calls out, without raising his burgundy eyes from the skull. When the older Alpha doesn't stop, he lowers his hands and takes a step back, squaring his shoulders to gaze into the smiling, genial face of his former psychiatrist.

Hannibal grins, tasting salty fear and smoky defiance on his tongue. His own irises prickle, gleaming red in the low light, and the fine hairs rise across his skin.

'Hello, Randall.'

My clever boy.

Randall glances beyond the other man, checking for an ambush. He knows where the exits are; he could run, now, and probably escape.

'Dr Lecter.'

Hannibal turns his body towards the saber-cat display, lowering his appearance of a threat, but Randall remains alert. That's good; he worked hard to nurture such honed instincts in him. It would be disappointing to find him wasting his gift.

'You will always be ruled by your fascination with teeth,' he murmurs, nodding towards the prehistoric fangs.

Randall smiles, his shoulders dropping a fraction.

'That's what you said to me when they brought me into your office,' he says. His voice is hoarse, and faintly rusty from disuse. It is a throat more used to howling than talking. 'That very first time.'

‘Is that what I said?’ Hannibal feigns ignorance, grinning again, but Randall simply nods, and begins to wipe off the screwdriver in his hand.

‘Yeah.’ He nods, his movements jerky. ‘I was crying. I was *dreading* telling you what was wrong with me and…’ He sighs, and tosses the rag to the floor. ‘You made it easier.’ As Hannibal approaches, Randall’s eyes glow a different shade of red; richer, warmer, and a purr rumbles in his chest. ‘Other visits, too.’

‘A therapist’s life is equal parts counsel and curiosity,’ Hannibal replies, categorizing each layer of Randall’s scent. It is the wild, rough essence of a young Alpha male fresh out of Rut, still sweet with innocence and coppery from the blood staining his skin. It is death, and life, in perfect harmony.

Beautiful.

‘We set a patient on a path,’ he murmurs, gazing into the face of his protégé. ‘But are left to wonder where that path will take them.’ A pause, the shadows between them thickening until they hum with the mingled purrs shaking each particle of air. ‘You’ve come so very *far*, Randall.’

‘Long time since you treated me,’ Randall says, his palms tingling and pulse throbbing. He follows Dr Lecter’s movement, keeping the stronger Alpha in his line of sight as the other man walks around the display.

‘Which is why I wanted to talk to you about your wonderful progress,’ Hannibal says, a sense of urgency to his voice, now. ‘Just for a moment. Privately.’

He comes to a stop right in front of Randall, their crimson eyes matching, and parts his lips to show a hint of fang.

‘I’ve seen what you’ve done,’ he whispers, reaching for his hand. Randall pulls back, defiance flaring like an ember in his gaze.

‘What have I done?’

‘You bore screams,’ Hannibal purrs. ‘Like a sculptor bears dust from the beaten stone…’ He looks him over, taking obvious note of Randall’s squared shoulders, proud chest and burgeoning arousal. ‘That crying boy doesn’t cling to you anymore.’ He tips his head closer and smiles. ‘What clings to you now? What clings to your teeth?’

Randall hesitates, but only for a second. When he speaks, his voice is low, and it hums with excitement, quavering with the relief of sharing his experience.

‘Ragged bits of scalp… Trailing their tails of hair like comets.’

Hannibal feels burning fingers touch his own, and permits Randall to grip his hand tightly. He gives it a squeeze, and nods, just once, his gut clenching up with fierce joy.

‘Beautiful.’

He sees Randall tremble, sees him preen under the praise, but the moment cannot last. Hannibal sighs, and wets his lips.

‘They are looking for you.’

‘I don’t think I can stop,’ Randall whispers, still holding tightly to his mentor.

‘I don’t want you to,’ Hannibal replies. ‘But they *will* find you, Randall.’ He covers the younger Alpha’s hand with both of his own, forming a shield. ‘And, when they do, it’s important that you do *exactly* as I say.’

Because I have a far more fitting use for you.

***

The lights are on in the little farmhouse when Hannibal arrives in Wolf Trap. His heart quickens, and he wastes no time collecting his overnight bag from the trunk. The dogs bark their greeting, and Will is standing in the doorway by the time he reaches the porch.

‘You’re late,’ the Omega says, reaching for him before he can reply. A hot hand grips the lapels of his coat, dragging him into the warmth of the house, and then, as before, Hannibal finds himself slammed back up against the panes of glass, with a hungry mouth covering his own.

Will locks the door, blindly pushing the leather bag from Hannibal’s grip and shoving at his coat. He nips at his Alpha’s bottom lip and sucks it between his teeth, moaning at the flavor of his mate, and hugs him tight when Hannibal closes the distance between them.

‘I made dinner,’ he mumbles, walking backwards and pulling Hannibal with him towards the bed. ‘Do you need to eat now?’

‘I’m sure you’ll satisfy me,’ Hannibal promises, and Will purrs his praise at such a clever answer. He unbuttons Hannibal’s suit jacket and moves to unlace his tie as Hannibal shrugs out of the clothing. Then, as the Alpha removes his cufflinks and waistcoat, Will snaps threads in his haste to get his shirt off, chucking it into a heap on the floor. His legs hit the edge of the bed and he sits, leaning forwards to nuzzle at his mate’s crotch, instead.

Hannibal chuckles, flattered by his ardency, and captures Will’s head between both hands. He toes off his shoes and socks, nodding for Will to do the same, and then pushes him onto his back, crawling over him as Will shuffles up the bed to stretch out beneath him.

‘Is this you being intimate with your instincts?’ Hannibal teases, nibbling little kisses along Will’s jawline and down the hollow of his throat. Will moans softly, his skin pebbling at the touch, and arches his spine to press his front up against Hannibal’s chest.

‘Some of them,’ he replies, crooking a leg to hold his Alpha close. ‘The easy ones.’

‘Sex isn’t always easy,’ Hannibal says, stroking the pad of his thumb back and forth over a dusky brown nipple, watching it harden under his touch. ‘It usually complicates matters.’

‘Did with us,’ Will agrees, spreading his hand through the greying hair between Hannibal’s pecs, tugging gently before finding a nipple of his own, giving the little bud a squeeze before rubbing it better. ‘What would have happened if we hadn’t bonded?’

‘One of us would likely be dead,’ Hannibal whispers, resuming his gentle exploration of Will’s neck. He follows an intoxicating scent up to the patch of silky skin just beneath his Omega’s ear, and it’s only when he rasps his tongue over it and tastes the smoke and sugar sweetness of it that he realizes what Will has done.

Watching Hannibal pull back and stare down at him in surprise, Will feels his eyes flood gold, even as he bares his fangs in a wicked grin. He very deliberately runs a hand all the way down the front of his body, undulating to the movement, and slips his fingers under the waist of his pants, reaching down to gather up some of his own wetness as he did earlier. Then, instead of rubbing it onto his skin, leaving a trail for his Alpha to follow, he holds out the glistening digits for Hannibal to suck.

With a rumbling purr, Hannibal dips his head to take both fingers deep into his mouth, licking up the length of them and swallowing the offering. He pushes his tongue between the gap and then sucks, releasing the wet skin with a little pop.

‘What do your instincts tell you to do with me?’ Will asks, his voice barely more than a whisper, glowing eyes locked on his mate. He lets his hips rock in time to the movement of Hannibal’s mouth, and presses his free hand flat to the small of the other man’s back, savoring the ripple of muscles moving beneath the skin.

‘Savage and cherish you in equal measures,’ Hannibal breathes, leaning down to kiss Will, making him taste himself. ‘Protect you from all harm, whilst marking you as my own.’

‘You want to hurt me,’ Will says, pushing the words into Hannibal’s teeth and digging his nails into his Alpha’s bicep. ‘And let me hurt you.’

‘Yes.’

‘But you’re not ready to give up control.’ Will lies back, stretching out and raising his arms over his head. He crosses them at the wrists and tilts his head back, displaying himself in an admission of total surrender, earning a low, yearning growl from Hannibal. Smiling, he stares up at his mate, his eyes heavy-lidded, pulse thundering, his scent thick and inviting. ‘Like this.’

‘Will…’ Hannibal falls forwards, desperate to cover every inch of his mate’s body. He grips Will’s wrists in one hand, crushing the small bones together, and locks his teeth into the front of the Omega’s throat, right over his windpipe. Will bucks, a strangled whimper encouraging Hannibal to soften his jaw, to mark him instead of tearing him open, and Hannibal rolls his erection down against Will’s thigh even as he sets about sucking a bruise into the other man’s pale skin.

‘Trust me,’ Will gasps, gazing sightlessly at the ceiling when Hannibal punctures his neck and laps at the blood. ‘Like I trust you.’

‘You don’t trust me,’ Hannibal replies, slithering down Will’s body to unzip his trousers. He eases both jeans and underwear down Will’s legs, engulfing his mate’s hardness in his mouth before the clothing hits the floor.

Will sucks in a sharp breath, grinding his ass back against the covers to keep himself from choking his Alpha. He keeps his arms where they are, the joints still tender from Hannibal’s punishing grip. A wanton moan escapes his lips, and he looks down to see his Alpha’s silky hair falling forwards onto a high forehead, dark eyes glowing crimson and cruel lips pulled back into a dangerous smile. He watches as Hannibal lowers his lips to the sensitive tip of his cock, *just* kissing the very end, gathering up pearly wetness to then lick away with his tongue, before teasing him with a gentle bite.

‘F-*fuuck*…’ Will shivers, his hands clenching into helpless fists above him, thighs shaking even as he spreads his knees further apart. Hannibal sucks him down, pulling hard on the aching erection, and then nips sharply on his skin, making Will hiss in pain.

‘*Do* you trust me?’ Hannibal asks, forcing Will to spread as wide as he can go, pushing his legs up and out to bare all of himself. ‘*Can* you trust me?’

Will’s blood roars in his ears, and he feels sweat dribble down his back. His chest is tight with nerves, but he’s so fucking hard it *hurts* and, when he blinks, tears trickle from his eyes. This isn’t how he planned the night to go, but, at the same time, he can’t imagine anything *else*. It’s perfect. It’s *them*.

‘I trust you,’ he whispers, his voice cracking. There’s a moment of silence, where he feels Hannibal’s surprise through the bond, and then the other man snarls. Hannibal takes him deep into his mouth, grazing every inch with his teeth before licking and kissing him better, fingers gathering up the sudden rush of hot slick at the sensations wrung from his body.

And Will lets him; he lies back, floating in a sense of peace, his heart still racing but his fear sated. He doesn’t hold back his cry when Hannibal leaves his cock to suddenly sink his teeth into the meat of his inner thigh, and the Alpha shakes his head as he bites, tearing deep into the flesh to leave a brutal mark on his mate.

‘You trust me?’ Hannibal demands, his voice hoarse, mouth dripping when he finally leaves the wound.

‘Yes,’ Will promises, meeting his gaze with an unflinching certainty. ‘No matter what you do to me, I know you’ll stop when I need you to.’

Hannibal narrows his eyes. He sits up, kneeling between Will’s spread legs, and unbuttons his own suit trousers, pushing them to his knees before leaving the bed to remove them fully. He collects both his tie and Will’s belt from the floor, and then, when Will nods, walks around to the side of the bed, burgundy eyes locked onto golden ones as his mate tracks his movement.

‘You are a wicked thrill, Will Graham.’ He leans down, kissing Will gently before winding the tie around his head, blinding him and rendering him paralyzed. ‘*Aš tave myliu.*’

‘I know,’ Will breathes, quivering at the feel of leather slithering down his belly. He can’t tense because of the blindfold, which is exactly why Hannibal put it on him, and his breathing remains slow and steady, even as the belt whispers across his erection.

‘Five,’ Hannibal murmurs. He returns to the foot of the bed, and moves back into position, kneeling between Will’s legs. He lets his Omega lower his feet to the mattress, to ease the strain on his muscles, and circles a finger around the glistening bite mark. ‘You’ll scar.’

‘Won’t be the last time,’ Will murmurs, smiling softly. He feels a flicker of Hannibal’s amusement through their bond, and then a strong, warm palm covers his navel. Covers their baby.

‘Here we go,’ Hannibal says. ‘Keep breathing.’

Even if Will could nod, the first blow comes too fast for it. There’s a whistle, a crack of the belt on skin, and then heat flares across his uninjured thigh. He hears the noise he makes; a high, laughing yip, more surprise than pain, and Hannibal’s answering purr, and then the second strike comes, landing scant millimeters from the first.

One of the dogs barks at the sound, and Hannibal hushes them, immediately following it with a third stripe, and then a fourth. Will’s thigh is stinging, the skin alive with nerves in the cool air, but he keeps breathing, and he knows that he could take so much more if they wanted to draw this out.

But Hannibal said five, so five it will be. He floats in darkness, wondering when the next hit will be, and then –

CRACK.

The belt lands, hard, right on the bitemark, and Will hears his own keening mewl, even as sharp pain roars up his torso.

Hannibal lays the belt aside and covers his Omega’s body with his own, soothing him with gentle touches and skating his fingers over the humming flesh.

‘I’m here,’ he whispers, spreading his hands across Will’s trembling chest before running them down over his stomach, and then back up to cradle each side of his face as he kisses him. ‘I’m here, *mylimasis*.’

‘I know,’ Will mumbles, trying to reach for him, his limbs heavy and useless, head slow as lips seek out his Alpha’s. ‘You’re always here.’

‘Do you want me to fuck you, Will?’ Hannibal kisses him after his crude words, grinning when Will moans into the embrace. He waits for his Omega’s nod, as eager as he can be whilst blinded, and then hoists both legs over his arms. Reaching past Will’s straining erection, he gives it a quick, teasing stroke and then swirls two fingertips through the slick gleaming like oil between his Omega’s buttocks. The ring of muscle flutters, and Will’s breath catches around another mewl.

The heat of him almost scalds his skin, and Hannibal's throat rattles with a deafening purr as he slides his first finger inside Will's body. The smooth channel pulls him in, muscles working in waves as Will stretches open for him. Easing a second finger in, Hannibal crooks his knuckles, catching the hidden spot just inside, and he grins at the feel of Will's pulse jumping, even though the Omega can't tense or move.

'Hannibal…'

Will clutches weakly at the covers, suspended in gold-flecked darkness, unable to move or spur his Alpha on, only able to *feel* every excruciating spark of pleasure being stroked from his body. He wants to shudder, to roll his pelvis and wrap his legs tight around Hannibal's waist, yank him down and fuck himself hard on his Alpha's knot, but he can only lie there and take whatever Hannibal wants to give him.

'*Please*.'

'Let me see you,' Hannibal says, and he reaches down to pull the blindfold away. Will shakes his head, blinking to clear his vision, and then surges upright. He holds on tight as Hannibal gathers him up, and they turn together, fingers slipping free and limbs tangling.

And then Hannibal lies back, gazing up at his glorious mate as Will straddles him, feeling eager hands reaching for his straining erection, worshipping it between two burning palms before Will lifts himself up and positions the glistening tip at the entrance to his body. Hannibal's heart jumps, and he urges Will on, making sure to keep his hips down so the other man can take each inch at his own pace.

Will holds his breath, bracing himself for the stinging stretch, and shudders his way down, taking Hannibal to the root. The soft slap of balls against his ass cheeks makes white fire zing through his veins, and he rocks back and forth, adjusting to the sudden invasion, each movement sending frissons of pleasure radiating out from the pit of his belly.

'Fuck… I *love* feeling you inside me…' He closes his eyes to concentrate on the sensation, tipping his head back and baring his throat, making tingles flow from his scalp to his toes. He's acutely aware of the low ache in his own balls, the sharper, more urgent need in his throbbing cock, and a deep pleasure inside him that promises *so* much more if he can just get that spot over and over and over. '*Alpha*…'

'Stay with me.' Hannibal grabs a handful of Will's backside, relishing the firm muscles and slippery heat down the middle, knowing that he is buried as far inside his mate as he can go, and that, very soon, a knot will lock them together. He groans, rocking up into the hot, vice-like passage, and Will's eyes fly open as every thought disappears in a burst of colored sparks.

'Oh… oh *fuck*… There, there…' He bears down, rolling and circling his hips, chasing the feeling, and Hannibal starts to follow him, digging his fingers into his hips to pull him down onto each thrust. Will arches his spine, splaying his own hands across his chest before falling forwards and catching himself on Hannibal. He leans down, riding him hard and fast, and Hannibal snarls at him as he shoves himself upright, clutching him tight.

‘*Pabučiuok mane.’*

Their lips meet in a furious kiss, and Hannibal sucks his tongue down when Will opens his mouth to snatch a breath, tangling his fingers in his mate’s curls to keep him close as they move together, the springs of the bed creaking protest and the air filled with the sounds of heavy breathing and smacking flesh.

‘I love you,’ Hannibal whispers, stroking Will’s cheeks and throat, over and over, pushing up with his free hand to get more power behind his thrusts. ‘*Aš tave myliu.* I love you.’

‘I know,’ Will groans, sweat running down his back to gather in the dimples of his ass, and darkening the small curls on his forehead. His breath hitches on a sob and he shudders, dangerously close to orgasm. ‘I love you too… I hate you, I *fucking* hate you, but I love you.’

‘You’re mine,’ Hannibal growls, clawing vicious lines down Will’s shoulders, scraping off his flesh as he grabs for his crest. He digs his nails into the pulsing ridges and feels Will’s pulse thunder beneath the silky skin as the scar swells at the touch. ‘You’re *mine!’*

‘I’m yours,’ Will sobs, burying his face in Hannibal’s rigid shoulder, tears running freely from his eyes as the pleasure spikes into a cresting wave of white bliss. ‘I’m yours; I’m yours… Alpha… Alph- Hannibal… Oh *fuck*… *FUCK!’*

He comes hard, jerking like a puppet on broken strings, spilling his release across both of their chests as surge after surge of climax hits him. It doesn’t *stop* though, because Hannibal doesn’t stop, and Will keens, staring helplessly into his mate’s glowing crimson eyes, feeling so thoroughly *loved* that he can’t breathe with the intensity of it.

Hannibal holds him close, flayed alive with the force of his own emotions. He hasn’t felt anything like this before, and he wants nothing more than to make Will take it from him, to understand and tame it, and make it manageable. Lost in the maelstrom, he cries out as he reaches the peak of his own climax, and smells salt when tears run from his eyes at the sweet relief of it. He quivers, hips bucking up and up and up, pumping his seed as deep inside Will’s body as it can go, knot swelling to seal them together, conjoined as nature intended, as fate designed.

‘*Will*…’

Without thinking, he bites down, hard, into the meat of Will’s scarred shoulder, and blood runs between them, sharp and hot. Will groans, too wracked with pleasure to do more than struggle weakly, and Hannibal purrs like a tiger as he suckles the wound, easing his teeth from the muscle before the damage becomes too great.

He has no idea how long they stay like that; sat up in a tangle of covers, Will’s forehead on his shoulder as he rides out his high, slowly bleeding from two deep bites. Hannibal has never felt such a complete sense of *peace* before, and he revels in it, only moving to drape one of the throws around Will’s body when his Omega start to shiver.

‘Hmm…’ Will smiles, his eyes heavy as he snuggles up against Hannibal’s chest. Their skin is tacky with sweat and seed, but he loves the thick, rich smell of their scents together like

this, and runs his nose back and forth along Hannibal's collarbone to catch the air moving between them. 'Don'wan'move.'

'In English?' Hannibal chuckles, stroking his partner's sweat-damp hair and kissing his temple.

Will smiles into the touch, his limbs numb and useless. He sways, the odd almost sharply sweet tear of pleasure welling in his eyes, and turns his head to press a kiss to Hannibal's palm.

'I don't want to move,' he whispers, nibbling the ball of his Alpha's thumb. 'I want to stay with you, like this, forever.'

'That might get uncomfortable,' Hannibal reasons, and Will gives a playful huff at how literal his mate can sometimes be. He shifts, and a series of aches, throbs and stings makes him aware of how rough the sex was.

'Do I need stitches?' he asks, inspecting his shoulder. Hannibal guides his hands away and checks the wound with a precise, clinical touch.

'Yes,' he admits, pressing the tissue back together and watching it part again, unable to seal. 'Your thigh may only require dressing, however.'

'Hm.' Will nods, and looks down at his injury again, watching absently as a line of blood slides down his softening chest. 'At least it replaces the scar where Jack shot me.'

'One could argue that was still my mark,' Hannibal says, murmuring the words into Will's cheek as they continue to pet and nuzzle one another. 'As he shot you in defense of my life.'

'My aim is terrible,' Will mumbles, half-kissing Hannibal's jaw, his lips rasping along the other man's stubble after a long day. 'You'd probably have survived.'

'Perhaps you would have emptied the clip into me, as you did with Garrett Jacob Hobbs,' Hannibal reasons, skittering his fingers up near Will's cooling crest and then away, down his shoulders and along his arms, leaving shivers in his wake. 'Shredded me with lead until the monster you perceived was gone.'

Will shakes his head, and closes his eyes as he hides in Hannibal's embrace.

'The monster will never be gone,' he whispers, wondering if he'll ever remember what really happened that day. 'You'll always be inside me.'

You woke something in me, and then you put a baby in my womb. You're a part of me, now. Always.

***

They wake late the next morning, still wrapped in each other's arms and sharing the bed with Winston, Jack-Dog and Buster. Hannibal rouses Will with a trail of kisses along his jaw and

throat, easing him from dreams with soft words and soothing hands, and Will comes back to himself to the sound of his own purring.

Blushing, he quickly stifles the rest of the noise and reaches for his cell phone. The movement tugs on the new stitches in his shoulder, and he rubs at the matching dressing on his thigh as he checks two new messages from Jack.

‘He has a suspect,’ he says, glancing at Hannibal, who watches impassively. ‘An assistant curator, at the Natural History Museum in Baltimore.’

‘Do you need a lift?’ Hannibal asks, propping himself up with an arm tucked under his head, arranging the covers over his naked torso. ‘I have to go to the office, anyway.’

‘Thanks.’

Will sends Jack a text confirming his availability, and then stretches in a series of popping joints and suppressed winces.

‘I never considered myself to be kinky, before I met you,’ he murmurs, rolling his head to look at Hannibal, who is still staring down at him with the same passive expression but sharp glint of interest in his eyes that he wore when they first met. ‘Guess you made me realize a lot of things about myself.’

‘We see potential in our beloved,’ Hannibal says, the words a chilling echo of his dream. Will frowns at him, and reaches for one of his hands, stroking back and forth over the knuckles.

‘Have you said that to me before?’ he asks, inspecting the skin for minute scars. Signs of a life lived. ‘When I was in Heat?’

‘What do you remember?’ Hannibal asks, careful not to let his heart skip a beat the way it wants to. He is relieved when Will merely shrugs, seemingly content to let the mystery remain.

Playing with his Alpha’s fingers, Will takes the deflection as confirmation that, yes, Hannibal has said that to him before. Curiously, he finds he doesn’t *mind* as much as he used to. As though, with each day strengthening their bond, he can see the past a little more from Hannibal’s twisted perspective.

The traumatized are unpredictable because we know we can survive. Hannibal survived, just as I did.

‘What are you thinking?’ Hannibal asks, leaning over to cup the side of Will’s face. Will smiles up at him, and rolls in for a lazy kiss.

‘I’m thinking that I need a shower,’ he says, kicking back the covers. ‘And that *you* should make breakfast today.’

He rises from the bed and skips out of reach just as Hannibal swipes for his ass, blowing him a smug kiss before leaving to let the dogs outside. As he passes the kitchen sink, clean and long-empty of severed ears, his shadow swells. And, as he wraps a coat around his bare body,

protecting himself from the cold as he waits on the back porch, the faint, remembered sound of choking fills Will's mind, overlaid with the sting of betrayal and the deep-burning desire for revenge.

I'm also thinking up a trauma you won't *survive.*

***

The museum is busy when he and Jack arrive, and they have to wait in the Hall of Predators whilst a member of staff goes to fetch Randall Tier. There are school fieldtrips out in the main part of the museum, with children morbidly fascinated by the reconstruction of a mammoth dying in a tar pit, but, thankfully, they haven't reached this area, yet.

The quick, controlled steps of the approaching Alpha makes Will's crest prickle, and he moves away as Mr Tier walks up to them both.

'You wanted to speak to me?' Randall looks to Jack, first, and the taller Alpha straightens from admiring a display of fossilized wolf skulls.

'Ah, Randall Tier.' Jack pulls his badge out from his pocket and holds it up for inspection, his fedora in the other hand, down by his side. 'Special Agent Jack Crawford. I'm with the FBI.' He nods to Will. 'This is Will Graham.'

Will doesn't acknowledge the young Alpha's curiosity, and puts the saber-cat skeleton between them. Despite the warmth of the museum, he's kept his scarf wound about his mauled throat, and his coat is buttoned tight. More than anything, he doesn't want to deal with Jack's questions or opinions on his activity with Hannibal last night.

He can feel Randall's eyes on him, though, and can smell the way his scent sharpens. Randall is, after all, an unbonded Alpha in the presence of an Omega, and Will's mate is nowhere to be seen.

'Er, did you, er, put all that together?' Jack asks, pulling Randall's attention back to himself and directing it to the column of skulls – directly *away* from Will, which he is grateful for.

Randall blinks, swallows and nods, clamping down on his hunger.

'Yes, I did.'

'Nice work.' Jack nods at him, a hint of red in his own irises. He waits for a moment, letting the tension build, and then points towards a particular skull. 'What is that?'

'*That* is a cave bear,' Randall says, wiping his palms off on his thighs. Jack nods, noting the nervous gesture, and narrows his eyes.

'You put together a lot of cave bears, do you?'

Randall shrugs.

‘I put them together, take them apart… Put them back together again.’ He can’t help but look over towards Will again, but fastidiously returns his crimson-ringed gaze to Jack when the other Alpha speaks.

‘So, you understand their mechanics, and how they’re engineered?’

‘Oh, yeah,’ Randall says, pushing enthusiasm into his voice. ‘We understand a *lot* about cave bears. Their fossils have been found in the tens of thousands; all over southern Europe. Very common.’ He nods and smiles, as if pleased to offer this piece of learning. From the corner of his eye, he tracks Will’s steady progression around the saber-cat, and notes the tang of antiseptic beneath the Omega’s scent-blocker and cologne.

Dr Lecter must have hurt him, last night. He’d said he would.

Why is he willing to give you away?

‘The reason I *ask*,’ Jack says, demanding Randall’s focus again. ‘Is because a cave bear *skull* was used recently as a murder weapon.’

Randall nods in consideration.

‘Prehistoric jaws and claws *are* designed to do what they do best,’ he says. He doesn’t expect the Omega to speak; when Will does, it is from just behind the saber’s fangs.

‘The victims were torn apart.’

Randall locks onto him, his irises flashing red, and a muscle jumps in his jaw. Will huffs, and dips his chin a fraction, displaying just a *hint* of his throat as he returns to the saber’s ribcage; right where the heart would be.

‘He used the right *tool* for the job,’ he murmurs, feeling his eyes prickle as he pushes the gold to show more prominently.

Randall gulps, and forces his own instincts to quiet.

‘Well, look inside the skull and you’ll find what the job *is*,’ he manages, sounding more strained than he’d like. The Omega’s scent, even dulled, is making his mouth water, and he looks back at Jack, brow furrowed in confusion as to *why* an Omega, of all people, is here without its mate.

‘You have a history of trouble with things inside your head,’ Jack says, bulldozing straight into the reason for his visit, before the younger Alpha can get too distracted with Will. Keeping him on his toes is one thing; slipping into Rut would be a disaster. ‘Isn’t that right, Mr Tier?’

Randall looks from Will to Jack, coldly grateful for Dr Lecter’s warning last night.

‘Is that what this is about?’ He shakes his head. ‘You think I killed someone with a fossil?’

Jack merely shrugs, waiting with eyebrows raised.

Randall growls.

‘I *had* an identity disorder.’

Had.

Will’s shadow stirs, purring its envy at Randall’s peaceful acceptance of his true nature. He looks over, the warm current slithering up his legs as the Alpha continues,

‘The doctors told me the internal map of my body didn’t match reality. Do you know what it’s like when the skin you’re wearing doesn’t fit?’

‘I can imagine,’ Will whispers, gazing at him with eyes of pure gold. Randall tries not to, but he can’t keep his red eyes on Jack; when he answers, he speaks only to the Omega.

‘I *know* who I am, now.’ A small smile, barely showing his teeth. ‘And I’m doing *much* better.’

The lie that comes next is directed to Jack. Randall shrugs, and shoves his hands into the pockets of his lab coat.

‘I’m socializing. I take my medication. I’m employed, and I work *very* hard.’ A proud flash of red. ‘I’m proof that mental illness *is* treatable.’

It’s a perfect answer; if Jack pushes him now, he could be liable for discrimination.

Will turns away, Randall’s words ringing with Hannibal’s voice in his mind.

Everything is treatable… But what’s your version of “better”?

***

He cancels his therapy session with Hannibal that evening, and declines an invitation to dinner. He needs space, and time to think.

Jack drops him home, and Will spends the afternoon cleaning and doing laundry, washing away the evidence that, once again, he had a major lapse in judgement.

So much for making him Court me and earn it, he thinks, angrily shaking out a fresh duvet and smoothing it over the bed. *I can’t keep my needy Omega hands off him. It’s nearly as bad as when I was in Heat.*

The crunch of tires outside signals an approaching car, and nerves tighten his gut as the dogs start to bark.

If that’s him, I’ll fucking strangle the bastard.

Will rolls down his shirtsleeves and pulls on a fleece-lined gilet before slipping out onto the porch. He hushes the pack through the screen door and they settle down, eagerly waiting to see their new guest.

‘Hi.’

It’s not Hannibal, but the young Omega woman he’d met outside Hannibal’s office earlier that week. As she pushes open the door of her little sports car, Will can see that she’s wearing another sleek designer outfit, this time complete with opera gloves and what looks to be a leather poncho.

‘I don’t know if you remember me,’ she calls, climbing the side steps onto the porch. ‘But I met you outside of Dr Lecter’s office?’

‘I remember,’ Will says, his hands rammed deep into his pockets, eyes flicking past her for any other unwelcome visitors. He shakes his head, his teeth chattering. ‘How’d you find me?’

The other Omega smiles, and lowers her eyes.

‘Well, as it turns out, you *are* famous.’

‘Huh.’ Will sniffs, considering his words before replying sharply, ‘You’re not exactly *anonymous* yourself, Margot.’

Margot Verger grins, and closes the last few steps between them.

‘Did you sneak a peak inside Dr Lecter’s calendar?’ she teases, and Will looks away as his cheeks flush pink.

‘That is *exactly* what I did,’ he admits, his own lips quirking into a sheepish smile. Try as he might, he can’t help but like her.

Margot gazes up at him, the gold bands thickening around her blue eyes. She tips her chin, displaying a sliver of pale throat, and even Will feels an instinctive urge to protect a younger, more vulnerable Omega than himself.

‘It’s cold,’ Margot says, a frown creasing her forehead. ‘Do you have any whiskey?’

Will hesitates, reluctant to let such an obvious ploy work against him, but, in the end, he nods and invites her in.

The dogs jump on her the moment they get inside, and Margot drops to a crouch with a delighted squeal, shedding her gloves and fussing every single member of the pack.

‘So many!’

She looks up at Will, one eyebrow arched in question. Will shrugs, standing awkwardly off to the side, hands still in his pockets.

‘Lot of strays dumped out here,’ he mutters. ‘And I like the company.’

‘More than your Alpha’s, it seems.’ Margot rises and removes her jacket in one smooth motion, draping it over the back of an armchair and wiping her hands off on her black pants.

She sits, crossing a slim leg over the other, and smiles up at Will when he refuses to answer the silent question.

Who and where is your Alpha?

Collecting two tumblers and a bottle of single malt from his liquor collection, Will pours Margot a generous measure, handing it over as he asks,

'So, what *is* the heir to the Verger meat-packing dynasty doing at my door?'

Margot inspects the deep amber liquid, her own gaze darkening when she replies,

'Oh, my brother is the heir, not *me*.' She gives an unhappy, if subtle, twist of the lips. 'I have the wrong biology, the wrong parts, *and* the wrong proclivity for parts.' She huffs, and sips the malt. 'Triple package. An Omega, a *woman* and a dyke. Daddy was *so* proud.'

Pouring himself a much smaller shot of whiskey, Will eases himself into the chair across from his guest, hiding a wince as his pants press against last night's bite. He sits forwards, with his hands clasped around the glass between his knees.

'You didn't answer my question,' he says, looking expectantly at her.

Margot pauses, and then examines her nails.

'I came for a character reference,' she says, glancing up from under her lashes. 'Omega to Omega.'

What's Hannibal been saying to you?

Waiting for her to continue, Will brings his whiskey to his mouth, inhaling the scent whilst barely wetting his lips with the liquor. If he's only having half a finger, he wants to savor every drop.

'What do you think of Dr Lecter's therapy?' Margot asks, fixing him with a sharp gaze.

Will shrugs.

'It depends what you're in therapy for,' he replies, smiling at her. Margot sniffs, and quirks an eyebrow.

'Oh, I'm therapy for all *kinds* of reasons,' she drawls, swirling her drink. 'The Vergers slaughter 86,000 cattle a day, and 36,000 pigs, depending on the season.' Her eyes cloud over; grieving for the animals sent to their deaths. 'But *that's* just the public carnage.'

Something in her tone makes Will's eyes prickle gold, and a low whine tugs at his throat.

'What's your private carnage?' he asks softly. Margot swallows hard, the gold in her own irises almost silver-bright before she gives him a grim smile.

'I tried to kill my brother.'

‘*Well*…’ Will sinks back, his shadow uncoiling to scent the air and purr its delight at the admission. ‘I assume he had it coming…?’

‘Did he ever,’ Margot whispers. She blinks away tears, barely able to suppress a shiver, and tilts her head at him. ‘What’s *your* private carnage?’

Will considers the question, tipping his glass to take another sip before answering.

‘I tried to murder Dr Lecter.’

Surprise registers on Margot’s face, and she has to adjust her grip on her glass. If she’s guessed correctly, then Dr Lecter is Will’s *Alpha*… To go to such drastic lengths to sever a bond…

‘Did *he* have it coming?’

‘What do *you* think?’ Will says, rolling his eyes at her. Margot thinks of her own unease with the Alpha’s suggestions; her own empathic sense that Dr Lecter is dangerous, more than just a regular Alpha, and she smiles.

‘I *can’t* say that I know.’

I can’t speak ill of him. He’s an Alpha, in a position of power over me, and he’s given me no proof of anything illegal.

‘Neither can *I*,’ Will purrs, and Margot nods. So they *are* bonded. She can only *imagine* what *that’s* like. To have Dr Lecter inside your head, all the time… No wonder Will doesn’t live with him.

‘We have some very similar issues,’ she says, taking a sip of whiskey. ‘Though I *doubt* that Dr Lecter gave you the same advice on murder that he gave *me*…’

‘And what’s that?’ Will asks, feeling Margot move her foot subtly closer to his. An instinctive urge for physical contact with another Omega, perhaps.

Margot hums, and bares her teeth in a smile.

‘He said, “If at first you don’t succeed… try, try again.”’

Darkness swarms behind Will’s eyes, and he hums softly as he takes another drink of whiskey. He holds the spirit on his tongue for a long moment, raising his eyebrows as he swallows.

‘Actually, his advice wasn’t that different,’ he says, earning a puzzled look from Margot. He shrugs again. ‘He wants me to embrace my nature.’

‘And is it in your nature to kill?’ Margot asks, nudging him with the toe of her boot. Will nudges her back, a playful jest, and taps his fingers on his glass instead of replying. They regard each other for a while, and then Margot nods to the whiskey. ‘Should you be drinking?’ she asks, narrowing her eyes at him. ‘In your condition?’

Will frowns, a hand dropping to his stomach.

‘Did Hannibal tell you?’

Margot chuckles, and reaches forwards to take his tumbler from him. She pours the rest of his whiskey into her own, and makes a show of taking a large sip.

‘It’s an Omega thing,’ she explains, looking him up and down, a glint to her eyes. ‘You’re in your first trimester, right?’

‘How did you know?’

Margot nods wets her lips and her nostrils flare.

‘You smell hot, like a fire,’ she says. ‘Weirdly, we become more fertile when we’re first pregnant; especially males. If you were bonded to a woman, you could both end up carrying and have a litter born just weeks apart.’ Another shrug and a sip of whiskey. ‘If *she* wanted to.’

Will huffs a laugh, shifting uncomfortably, and pulls his feet back from her touch.

‘*Oh*… Er… I er, I didn’t know that…’ He coughs and rubs the back of his head, just above his tingling crest. If he concentrates, he can smell the layers of Margot’s scent; vanilla, jasmine and a gentle musk that would complement his own… He frowns, seeking a distraction from his overactive body. ‘Wait… How could a *woman* get me pregnant?’

Margot laughs and rolls her eyes.

‘It’s called *insemination*,’ she teases, shaking her head at his naivety. ‘Her eggs, your sperm, your womb… Two for one if you then get her pregnant as well.’ Another sip of whiskey. ‘Makes for an *interesting* Lamaze class.’

‘Hm.’ Will lets his gaze drift across the room, deliberately skirting the bed lying, freshly made, only a few feet away, until he settles on his dogs. ‘I haven’t told Hannibal,’ he says, knocking his knuckles against his thigh. *Tap, tap, tap.*

Margot mimics the gesture with her fingertips on the glass, a burgundy nail occasionally catching the rim.

‘You asked me if he’d told me,’ she says, regarding him carefully. ‘You think he knows?’

Will grimaces, and gives her a sour look from underneath furrowed brows.

‘I think Hannibal Lecter makes a point of knowing *everything* about *everyone* in his life. Patient or otherwise.’

‘Sounds like something he should be in therapy for,’ Margot jokes, and Will snorts a laugh.

‘Yeah, well, he used to be. His psychiatrist has *withdrawn* from social ties.’

Maybe even from life.

Another silence falls between them. Margot dangles one hand over the edge of her armrest until Bruce pushes his head up under her palm, and then all the dogs gather around for fuss. Buster and Underbite vie for premium space on Will's lap, whilst Winston contents himself with lying over his feet.

'I used to have a dog,' Margot says, playing with the silky fur of Bruce's ears. 'A Coonhound, called Ruby.' She bites her lip, quickly dragging herself away from the memory, and gives Will a wobbly smile. 'Now I just have horses.'

'I've not ridden since I was a kid,' Will says, casting his mind back to that one summer camp in his childhood. 'I think I fell off more times than anyone else put together.'

'Maybe I'll teach you, one day.' Margot grins around the rim of her glass, her eyes sparkling. She drinks, and then gestures to him again. 'I was expecting to meet you outside Dr Lecter's office; you weren't there.'

'Cancelled.'

'Bet Dr Lecter didn't like *that*.'

Will's upper lip curls back from a fang in an unmistakable sneer, and Margot gives a delighted laugh. She drains the last of her whiskey and puts the tumbler down on the desk.

'You two must have *amazing* fights,' she says, adjusting in her seat. 'What's it *like?'*

Sliding his fingers through Buster's fur, Will sobers at the question. He glances down, watching the little dog's ribs flare with each breath, and sighs.

'I think we'll be the death of each other.'

***

It takes a considerable amount of self-control not to call Will after the Omega cancels his Thursday therapy session, but Hannibal Lecter is a man of his word, and one of their Courtship conditions was that he would not approach Will outside of the pre-agreed dates, and would wait for Will to come to him.

After such intense lovemaking the other evening, Will is likely reeling from the emotions shared between them, and has retreated once more into isolation. Hannibal can give him the space that he needs… Just as long as Will finds his way back to him in the end.

He is, after all, a jealous lover.

Friday passes excruciatingly slowly, and, to his surprise, Hannibal finds himself in a coldly furious temper by Saturday morning. A lesser man would not be so adept at masking his emotions, but he conveys the same polite, clinical interest in his three pathetic excuses for human patients in the morning, and simply sits at his drawing table over lunch, sketching

Rembrandt's *Raising of the Cross* from memory, altering the details of Christ's face to resemble Will, instead.

When the clock strikes one o'clock, and there is the familiar double tap at the door, he rises in one smooth motion and crosses the room to greet his mate.

Will raises both eyebrows at the waves of hostility pouring off Hannibal when the Alpha opens the door.

'Bad day?' he mocks, pushing inside without waiting for an invite. He feels Hannibal's eyes scorching holes in his back, but he ignores the other man and shrugs out of his coat, hanging it beside the Alpha's and draping his scarf over both hooks.

'You are the only patient to blatantly ignore my 24-hour cancellation policy,' Hannibal says, clamping down on the near-overwhelming urge to grab Will, pin him and bite him into submission. He unbuttons his suit jacket and sits in his armchair, crossing one long leg over the other and clasping his hands on his knee.

Will wanders over to Hannibal's drawing table and stares down at a chillingly accurate sketch of himself being crucified. He clenches his hands into fists at his sides, and then gazes up towards the mezzanine library, refusing to grant his Alpha the sight of his face. Hannibal is pissy because he needed to be alone. Hannibal is a spoilt brat throwing a temper tantrum because his toy decided it wasn't available to be played with for two days.

'I'm not your patient,' he murmurs, taking a few, slow steps towards the window. His palms are tingling, and his crest throbs with the intensity of his Alpha's gaze. Hannibal is using all of his control to remain seated.

He frowns at him, glad he'd thought to wear his own, old clothes today. It's another show of defiance; a display of his independence. Hannibal needs to *learn*.

'I'm curious, though, what would *happen* if your patients started comparing notes, *Dr Lecter*.' He sniffs, and turns back to the window. 'What would *Randall Tier* have to say to me?'

Draping one hand on the chrome armrest of his chair, Hannibal strokes the smooth line of his jaw with the other, his crimson-ringed eyes never once leaving Will.

'What *did* Randall Tier say to you?' he asks, voice sharper than he'd like. Will huffs a bitter laugh, and shrugs as he turns fully towards him.

'He said he was *much* better now. That mental illness was treatable. Randall Tier is a *success* story.'

Hannibal watches, his anger diminishing with every moment spent in Will's company, leaving behind a sense of relief that he would not have expected, given his fury.

Perhaps it was something more akin to fear…

‘Do you believe he’s innocent?’ he asks, distracting himself from the doubt slithering through the passages of his mind. He refuses to entertain the possibility that he *needs* Will. Not in so obvious a sense, at least. They haven’t even Pair Bonded, yet. What would happen to him if they *did?*

Pacing back towards the sketching table, Will grinds his back teeth together.

‘I believe your *therapy* was *successful*,’ he growls, eyes flashing gold. He shakes his head. ‘You can be… persuasive.’

My clever boy.

Hannibal straightens, shoulders relaxing now as they return to their normal knife-edge banter. He has *missed* his beloved so very much, these last few days.

Will swallows, hating the lump in his throat.

‘How many have there *been?’* he whispers, blinking away tears. ‘Like Randall Tier? Like *me?*’

Someone with a spark of darkness inside them. Someone with potential… Do you even love me at all, or is it all just part of your game?

‘Every patient is unique,’ Hannibal replies, curious as to why Will is so upset by the idea of there being others nurtured in the same way. He is, after all, the best of them. The only one truly worthy. Does he not see that?

Another two steps; Will slides his hands into the pockets of his jeans, hiding the tremble in his fingers.

‘Your psychiatrist came to visit me at the hospital before my trial,’ he says, and he hears the distinct rumble of a growl catch in Hannibal’s throat.

‘Dr Du Maurier.’

Will swallows, a whine lingering on his lips.

‘She told me she believed me,’ he says, his heart hammering. ‘She knew there were others like me.’

Hannibal looks down, annoyed, his mouth drawn into a pinched line.

‘Fascinating,’ he snaps, and Will looks at him reproachfully.

‘Did you kill her?’

Raising his gaze, Hannibal holds the eye contact. He promised not to lie, after all.

‘No.’

She had already gone by the time I tried.

Will nods, knowing his Alpha speaks the truth. He feels his crest swell, rubbing against the silk patch sewn into his collar, flooding his body with heat. He wants to crawl into Hannibal's lap and kiss away the tension between them, but he was the one who first said sex wouldn't be used as a distraction. This is exactly the sort of difficult conversation they need to have if they are going to *work*.

'What do you think about… when you think about killing?' he asks, tilting his head as he turns fully towards his mate, now.

Hannibal's pulse quickens, and his own darkness reaches like a branch towards the peace offering before him. He sighs, the last of his tension trickling away. Will is *his*, and they are beautifully together.

'I think about God,' he replies, pleasure warming his tone. Watches as Will frowns, curiosity creasing his forehead.

'Good and evil?'

'Good and evil has nothing to do with God,' Hannibal says, smiling gently. 'I collect church collapses. The same way some may collect stamps, or coins. Did you see the recent one in Sicily?'

Will shakes his head, but he can't break the contact between them, now. His partner is *alive* with dark power, and it is breathtaking to see.

'The façade fell on 65 grandmothers, during a special Mass,' Hannibal explains, fire dancing with shadows in his eyes. 'Was that evil? Was that God?' He grins. 'If He's up there, He just *loves* it.'

Will expects to be chilled by his mate's version of such a powerful and uncaring creator, but there is something comforting in the belief. The knowledge that he, even as an Omega, is utterly in control of his own destiny is… appealing.

'Typhoid and swans,' Hannibal says, repeating the wise words his father once said to him. 'It all comes from the same place.'

Acceptance settles like a smog over his mind, soothing him and silencing the buzzing questions. Will nods, feeling closer to Hannibal after such an insight. Still, the knowledge that his Alpha has possibly been as open with others leaves him stinging.

'Does Randall *Tier* believe in God?' he asks, a sulky bite to his voice.

Hannibal chuckles, experiencing a sudden rush of delight as he realizes that Will is *envious* of his former student.

Oh, my love. That's it; want me as I want you. Selfishly and without restraint.

‘Perhaps you should have a more personal conversation with Mr Tier,’ he suggests, raising a brow when Will frowns at him. ‘And ask him what he believes?’

‘I don’t think that would end well for *either* of us,’ Will says, gold overtaking the blue in his eyes. ‘And you might end up losing *two* lots of *potential*.’

Rising from the chair, Hannibal closes the distance between them and takes Will by the elbows. He holds him still, even when the Omega gives a half-hearted struggle, and nuzzles his hairline before pressing a kiss to Will’s temple.

‘In ancient times, an Alpha would present to his intended the slain body of a rival,’ he murmurs. ‘And the Omega would prove himself by fighting off the advances of another suitor.’

You gave me Tobias Budge, Will thinks, leaning closer and resting his forehead on Hannibal’s shoulder. *You want me to kill Randall Tier.*

‘Only the strongest survived,’ Hannibal whispers, stroking up and down Will’s back, leaving chills in his wake. ‘And when they mated, I imagine they ruled like gods.’

Rule with me, Will. Together, we can do anything.

***

He’s never killed an Omega, before.

As he dresses in leather and bone, Randall tries to imagine the different taste of blood and flesh. Dr Lecter wants him to hunt Will Graham; if Will survives, Randall can bond him, if he wants to.

He won’t survive. Nobody does.

He allows Dr Lecter to drive him towards the edge of the property; a small farmhouse out in Wolf Trap, Virginia. They hike together through the woods; Dr Lecter keeps up with him with surprising ease, and Randall purrs as the soothing presence of his mentor helps him slip more easily into his true state.

At the edge of the woods, where they can just see the warm glow of the porchlight, they stop.

‘The solitude of what you do is to be respected,’ Dr Lecter says, crimson eyes locked onto his mate’s house. ‘And I intend to honor that.’

I won’t be here to watch you fight him.

‘I’ve only come to offer words of encouragement.’ Hannibal takes a breath, tasting the bitter, thick musk of an Alpha in full Rut. Randall always works himself up into a frenzy. ‘You’re becoming, Randall. And this beast is your higher self. Your bodies, voices and wills are one.’ He purrs, just once, and gives Randall’s arm a pat. ‘Revel in what you are.’

And die for me.

***

There's definitely something outside. The dogs howl and bark, scratching at the front door until Will comes to see what all the fuss is about.

He's tense; he wonders if that's what set them off, but he's been alert all afternoon, ever since his session with Hannibal, and they've only just started acting up, so it can't be that. Maybe he's just overreacting, because he keeps playing out scenarios where Hannibal is going to send Randall Tier after him.

He wouldn't… He told me to confront him; not to expect an attack.

Surely his Alpha wouldn't be so reckless…

Pushing the porch door away from him, Will barely has a chance to react before Buster slips through his grasp and races out into the snowy night. Panic chokes him, and he scrambles after him, shutting the door on the others before they bolt after him.

'Hey! Buster! *Buster!*'

As the little dog makes a beeline for the trees, yapping furiously at whatever threat is out there, Will knows that Hannibal really *has* been so stupidly, *selfishly* reckless.

No… No, no, no…

A yelp tears at him, and Will presses a hand to his belly. Buster's hurt. He's been hurt, and Randall Tier is out there, in a suit made for tearing things apart.

A suit made for tearing *him* apart.

Dashing back inside, he shushes Jack-Dog and Bruce, and fumbles to get his shotgun from under the desk. His hands are numb; he can't *see* through the haze of tears in his eyes.

Why is he doing this to me? Why can't he protect me like a normal Alpha?

There are two rounds in the chamber, and Will wastes no time getting back outside. He pulls on his coat as he runs, slogging through knee-deep snow as he follows Buster's tracks away from the safety of the house, into the dark.

His lungs are burning, his heart beating a staccato against his eardrums. Will can *hear* the whimpers he's making, but he doesn't try to silence them. Maybe they'll make Randall pause; an Alpha will struggle to hurt an Omega…

It didn't stop Coby. Or James Gray. Or Hannibal.

'Buster!' Will shouts to drown out his own panicked thoughts, golden eyes sweeping the landscape for signs of his pet. 'Buster!'

The little dog calls for him, crying in pain where he lies in a bloody patch of snow. He's been mauled; there's a vicious slice across his side and part of his ear is ripped. Will wants to go to

him, but he has to keep the gun up. He scours the area, desperate for any sign of Randall, and then drops to his knees to gather him up.

Buster growls, his hackles rising as a shadow splits apart from the trees. Will cradles the little dog close, feeling a damp patch spread across his shirt, and swings his head around to see what the animal is snarling at.

A hiss carries on the air; Will can't tell if it's Randall himself, or his machine. He bares his own fangs and a branch cracks, echoing in three different locations.

He has to run.

Leaping forwards, he throws himself into a sprint towards the house. Buster is heavy against his side, the shotgun a hazard in his other arm. Behind him, Will hears the unmistakable roar of a pursuing Alpha, and a desperate howl of his own bursts free from blue-tinged lips. A call for his Alpha to fight for him.

But Hannibal won't. Even if he was here, even if he heard it, Will *knows* he won't come. This is *his* fight. *His* chance to prove himself.

If he survives, if he kills Randall, Hannibal will let him Bond him.

I fucking hate you.

Will falls into the house, scattering the dogs and spraying snow everywhere. He sets Buster down before the heater, hushing him as the little dog curls up to lick his wounds, and then hurries to switch off all the lights.

He needs to *see* Randall coming. Needs to fight him in his own darkness.

He backs away, gathering the shadows about him. The current swells, thick and warm, lending strength and speed to his body. He remembers the thrill of killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Remembers the surge of excitement at knowing Hannibal was moments from death…

How would it feel, Will, to kill me with your bare hands?

The only light now is from the little lamp beside him. As he reaches up, tugging on the thin chain and dimming the bulb, Will feels the shift in power as a fierce and intoxicating *certainty* overwhelms him. Certainty that he is going to survive. That he is going to kill.

I think about God.

Hannibal's words ring true; God is terrific. God is power. Pure and undiluted. Power to make life, and take it away.

Tonight, Will is going to take Randall's life away from him.

Glass shatters. Bone and metal splinters wood, and the window to his left explodes inwards, raining down a glittering hail of shards. Randall leaps, propelled by muscle and air, and his jaws open wide.

Now.

***

Ignoring Will's cry for help had been difficult. Hannibal can still feel the tightness in his own chest, and the sting of his skin as he'd forced himself to keep walking away from his Omega, one step at a time.

Now, wound tight as a spring, he strides across the entrance hall of his townhouse and heads towards the kitchen. He needs a glass of wine whilst he waits to see who will be victorious.

Please… please be Will.

He'd felt a surge of anger, adrenaline and then bone-deep satisfaction from his mate an hour ago, but now the bond is terrifyingly quiet. Perhaps Will is unconscious. Perhaps Randall mounted him, tore off his crest and re-bonded him…

Or, perhaps Will is dead.

Panic and regret swirls in a sickening mix deep in his gut, and Hannibal swallows back the bitter taste of bile. He looks down to see his hands tremble as he yanks open the sliding doors to the dining room –

And then freezes at the sight of Randall Tier's bruised and broken body, laid out in offering on his table.

'I'd say this makes us even.'

When Will speaks, his voice is quiet. He looks up from his kill, dressed in clothes picked out by his Alpha, wearing the cologne that complements his Alpha's scent, and locks golden eyes onto red.

'I send someone to kill you; you send someone to kill me. Even-Steven.'

We always have to be even, don't we?

Hannibal's lungs are too small for him to breathe. He sees a twisting collection of scenarios unfold before them, each more fantastical than the last.

Each a radiant joining of their minds to one whole.

He nods, and Will smiles, baring blood-stained teeth.

'Get on your knees.'

Naka-choko

Chapter Summary

After killing Randall Tier, Will Pair Bonds with Hannibal, taking their relationship to another, more intimate level, one that unsettles those closest to him. As their bond strengthens, and the edges of their minds bleed into one another, Will and Hannibal engage in a deadly new Courtship.

Margot seeks Will’s help with a problem.

Chapter Notes

PEEEEEEPS!!! I'm am SO very sorry that this has taken so long to write. Life has been absolutely mad these last few months. Major updates include:

1. Left my job
2. Started my own business
3. Mental health flare-up (no surprise, given the stress levels recently)
4. Sister in law is due a baby any day now

So, yeah, everything has fallen to the wayside. I'm just so glad I've finally got this chapter finished! It's definitely been on my mind the whole time, I've just not been able to get into the headspace (or had the time) to commit to a good session and motor through it.

As always, comments are very welcome and appreciated. Apologies for any errors/typos - if you spot a humdinger, please let me know and I will fix.

Love to you all! FYI, I'm writing a piece for the ABO Big Bang this year, so will be juggling this, Silence the Lambs and 'In the Shrike's Nest' for the next few weeks.

Wish me luck!!! xxx

TEN

Naka-choko

Waiting in the darkness, Will feels a delicious thrill of *knowing.* Knowing that he is going to kill. That he is going to watch the life drain from his victim's body, fade from his eyes, and leave him nothing but meat and bone.

He stares at the front door; the shotgun cold and heavy in his hands. Grips it tight, his palms tingling and heart racing.

And then the dogs bark. They are staring at the window, at the big, vulnerable space above Will's desk. Of course Randall's coming in there. He's attacking the flank.

As he turns, Will sees a shadow, a swarm of flies in the shape of man, and cold fear chokes his throat. He remembers the day in Minnesota, when he made that connection to Garrett Jacob Hobbs… Remembers the loneliness of life before Hannibal…

The Ravenstag bursts into the house, shattering glass and breaking wood, and time slows.

Will throws himself to the side, landing hard on his elbow. He doesn't even feel the pain, just rolls onto his back and brings the gun up to shoot.

Do you see?

It is the wendigo that lands, its white eyes blank and lifeless. Ebony skin clings to jutting bones, and bloodied antlers rise in a crown from its skull. Will feels tears on his cheeks, but he's not afraid, now. Heat burns the last of his doubt away, leaving him humming with a heady mix of love and rage.

My monster. You couldn't resist, could you? You can never resist testing me.

He straightens, the gun still trained on the wendigo's face. Jack-Dog barks, his booming voice an echo of the real world waiting for him. Of Hannibal, waiting for him. All he has to do is prove himself, one last time.

Come on, Will. Show me how strong you are, and I'm yours.

Hannibal's voice caresses him, settles like an iron on his crest, and Will feels the rattle of his own purr. He bares his fangs, lifts his chin in defiance, and throws the gun to the floor.

No more hiding.

The wendigo strikes, fast as a viper. A clawed hand smacks him across the face, throwing him back against the wall hard enough to crack the plaster. Will grunts, the bite in his shoulder smarting where stitches rip, his breath leaving his lungs in a rush.

Antlers graze his cheek, sharp enough to tear his skin. They pierce the wall behind him, locking him in a cage, trapping him scant inches from the dead eyes of his monster.

One wrong move and those razor edges will tear his throat open.

Gonna bond ya, darlin'… Need an Omega of my own…

Stale whiskey and concrete dust fills his nose, but Will can *feel* a warmth in the back of his mind; a larger shadow, looming over his own darkness, cradling him close and protecting him. Giving him strength when he needs it.

Hannibal is *not* Coby. He is a danger all his own, and the terror is how much he *loves* Will.

How much we love each other.

Hissing, Will grabs a hold of the monstrous antlers, ignoring how rough they are against his palms. How they slough the skin off his fingertips.

'Get *off* me!' He shoves the demon away from him. 'You're *not* my Alpha!'

The wendigo falls back, and Will leaps after it. He straddles an emaciated waist, heedless to the erection digging into his ass and his own hardness. He leans down, clawing at leathery skin, biting at a vulnerable throat and distracting the demon with a bruising kiss before pulling his arm back and punching with all his strength.

His knuckles connect with bone, splitting open with the force of the blow, and shockwaves reverberate up his back, even as blood sprays across his face. The satisfaction is dizzying, and Will rolls his hips down, laughing at the pleasure of it.

Another punch snaps the wendigo's head to the side, again when it glares at him, and then Will is hitting it over and over, pouring hate into every strike until the air is thick with copper, and filled with the wet, meaty sounds of broken flesh.

'You're not my Alpha! You'll never be my Alpha!'

And then, just as the jaw breaks and teeth come loose, Will sees that it's not the wendigo he's hitting but Hannibal. And he *is* his Alpha… Hannibal smirks up at him, pinned beneath his weight, challenge and belief blazing like coals in his eyes. He goads him to go further, go deeper, and Will *wants* to… He wants it so much it *hurts*.

Beating the life from the other man, he is nothing but light and air and color.

Expressing that love, our beloved's potential comes true. Hurt me, Will. Hurt me the way I hurt you. Just let go, and live. Truly.

Will stares down at him, his chest heaving and balls aching. His vision wavers, Hannibal's face blurring back and forth between demonic black and Alpha beauty, and then –

With a strangled snarl, Will grabs the antlers and twists.

Bones crack, and vertebrae sever. Randall Tier's neck breaks, and the light dims from his eyes.

Hours of stalking, for a death that took minutes.

Will's lungs burn, and he releases a slow, shuddering breath. He doesn't sag, though. He'd expected to feel cold, shocked, but he's not. Instead, there's a sense of warmth. Of peace. The

black fury has gone, but he's still riding his high.

He's done it. He's fought off a suitor, just like the primal Omegas, and earned the right to bond his Alpha back. He's proven his strength and his worthiness as a mate, once and for all.

Now he needs Hannibal. But first…

He climbs off Randall's body, kicking aside the broken fragments of bone that have fallen from the suit, and goes to check Buster. The little dog lets him examine the wounds, only fussing when Will has to push the fur apart to feel for the depth of the slice. It's not as deep as he'd thought, but it may still need stitches, and he needs to get him to the vets.

Jack-Dog licks his face, reminding him that he's covered in blood. There'll be questions if he shows up to the clinic like this.

Will stands, stripping out of his clothes and shedding them with every step towards the bathroom. He leaves the light off, unwilling to see himself to the harsh glare of a bulb, and splashes water over his face and neck, rinsing away the victory stains. Then, on an impulse, he sprays himself with the new aftershave that he and Hannibal bought together the other weekend, on their impromptu shopping trip. The earthy tones, laced with honey and vanilla musk, are a perfect match for Hannibal's cedarwood and cloves cologne, and will mingle their scents together in cohesive layers when he goes to his Alpha.

Layers of darkness.

He dresses in an Omegan replica of his earlier outfit, choosing clothes and boots that Hannibal bought for him, and finishes with his cashmere scarf and herringbone coat.

After stapling layers of plastic and blankets across the gaping wound of his former window, Will wraps Randall Tier in a sheet of tarp from his barn and drags him to the car, heaving and shoving the body into the trunk. He's sweating by the time he's finished, riddled with pain from pulled muscles and bruised shoulders, and *starving*. There's one more box of caramel pecans from the hamper Hannibal sent him, and he munches them as he drives Buster to the emergency clinic in Great Falls. He pets the little dog, who is lying in a bundle of blankets on the passenger seat, and lets Buster lick a little of the salt from his fingers.

'It's okay, buddy,' he murmurs, checking the dog's temperature and pulse every few minutes, careful of the dark roads. 'You're gonna be okay.'

He has to ring the buzzer when he arrives, and Buster whines when he's jostled by the movement. Will hugs him against his chest, swaddling him in fleeces and towels, and lays him down as carefully as he can when he gets inside the examination room.

'I think it was a bear,' he lies, watching the veterinarian perform the usual checks. 'Whatever it was, I managed to scare it off with a shot.'

'It looks like bear teeth,' the vet agrees, her fingers gentle as she inspects the bite. 'But it's not too deep, thankfully. We'll take some x-rays, and make sure no organs have been damaged. He'll need to stay here for a few days, but he should make a full recovery.'

Will nods, his throat tightening around his voice. He drops a kiss to Buster's head, and the little terrier licks away the tears trickling down his cheeks.

'Where's your Alpha, honey?' the vet asks, placing a motherly hand on his arm. Will glances at her, and sees her own irises ringed in red. She's responding to his distress; trying to soothe him. Fucking Alphas.

'I'm heading there now,' he mutters, returning his attention to Buster. 'This was more important.'

'Well, he's gonna be just fine,' the vet says, scooping Buster into her own arms. 'We'll get him sedated, and cleaned up, and he'll start to feel right as rain in no time.'

'I'll call for an update tomorrow.' Will gives Buster one last stroke, and then lets the Alpha dismiss him.

It's a long drive to Baltimore, and he still has a dead body in his car.

***

After abandoning Will to his fate, Hannibal had driven home. However, he'd found himself winded and dizzy, and had to pull over twice to calm himself enough to regain control of his limbs, stopping at a diner for a cup of stale coffee just to settle himself before attempting the remaining journey.

Now, entering the Baltimore townhouse, he can still feel the residual pain in his muscles, and he removes his gloves in jerking motions. His nerves are frayed, but the stinging fire is lessening, dulling the closer he gets to home.

He can only hope that his Omega is victorious… He has faith, but only death is certain, and he does not want it to be Will's death this night.

The bond has been silent for nearly an hour, and it terrifies him. He can't even pinpoint Will's direction, let alone sense how he is feeling. After the surge earlier, a wall has come between them. The cause of it is unknown, but, with each passing moment, dread coils in his gut, and Hannibal finds himself shivering.

Perhaps a glass of wine will soothe him as he waits for the outcome. He'd calculated the odds, after all, and deemed the attack to be an acceptable risk. If Will has died; if he has failed him…

I wouldn't have wanted such weakness in my mate, anyway.

He wonders when his cold objectivity towards the other man started to feel like such a blatant lie.

Glancing down at his hands, Hannibal frowns at just how much he is shaking as he pulls open the sliding doors to the dining room. He hadn't expected such vulnerability.

The air stirs and a myriad of scents hit him; blood, death and the sharp tang of antiseptic… Honey and musk, vanilla, sugar slick and wildfire…

Will.

His heart leaps, and Hannibal gazes down at Randall Tier, laid out on his dining table; a broken, bloodied corpse. A sacrifice. A testament to his Omega's strength and savagery.

'I'd say this makes us even,' Will growls, and Hannibal's skin pebbles at the sound of his beloved's rage, knowing he is the sole focus of such passion.

He closes the doors, sealing them in together, safely away from the outside world, and stares into Will's blazing gold eyes, feeling his own prickle red.

'I send someone to kill you,' Will continues. 'You send someone to kill *me*...' He smirks. 'Even-Steven.'

Quid pro-quo, my darling.

The air gets very thin, and Hannibal's vision shimmers with a thousand different scenarios, each one a beautiful union of their minds and bodies. Will has *more* than earned the right to Pair Bond with him. Even if they fought now, the Omega would likely win. Perhaps he'd won from the start. From the first moment Hannibal had looked into his eyes, back in Jack Crawford's office, and seen death.

Will smiles, baring blood-stained teeth.

'Get on your knees.'

Hannibal nods, numbed by the certainty of what is going to happen. What he *wants* to happen. But he pauses, delaying the inevitable satisfaction. Delays the pleasure just a little longer, so that his final surrender is all the sweeter for them both.

'Consider it an act of reciprocity,' he says, earning a frown and a scoff from Will.

'*Polite* society normally places such a *taboo* on taking life,' the Omega replies, hands twitching into fists at his sides.

Hannibal steps closer to the head of the table, his gloves held tight in a trembling grip, eyes taking in every wound inflicted on Randall by his mate. His knees ache to bend, but he remains locked upright.

Just a little longer, my love.

'Without death, we'd be at a loss,' he murmurs. 'It's the prospect of death that drives us to greatness.'

And how great you have become, myliamasis.

They pause, and Hannibal dips his head to catch Will's gaze when the Omega looks down at the body.

'Did you kill him with your hands?'

A low purr hangs in the air between them, and Will's mouth twitches into a dark, satisfied smile.

'It was…' He licks his lips, and then flexes his fingers, watching curiously as the broken skin oozes fresh blood. '*Intimate*.'

Hannibal nods, a twisting serpent of jealousy rising and then fading as soon as it starts.

'It deserves intimacy.' He approaches his mate, tossing his gloves onto the polished wood to take Will's hand between both of his own. 'You were Randall Tier's final enemy.'

His Omega's skin is burning hot, his pulse racing; if he hadn't so recently had a productive Heat, the thrill of the kill would likely have triggered another.

Will lifts his jaw, narrowing his eyes as Hannibal inspects his injuries. The Alpha is deferential, but he isn't on the floor, yet, and Will's patience is wearing thin.

Hannibal dips his head, pressing a kiss to bloody knuckles. He smiles at the shaky intake of breath from the other man, the low whine, and then he locks eyes with his mate, lets his irises flood red, and kneels.

Fuck…

Watching Hannibal, dressed in a crisp charcoal suit, dark tie and expensive coat, freely submitting to him…

As much as he'd wanted it, earned it, and expected it, Will still has to gulp back a lump in his throat at the actual *sight* of it. He places his hand on the top of Hannibal's head, stroking his silky hair, and leans in to kiss his forehead, closing the final distance between them.

'Thank you,' he whispers, draping himself over Hannibal's neck and shoulders as the Alpha buries his face against his navel, hugging him tight. 'I wanted it to be like this.'

'You've more than proven yourself,' Hannibal manages, surprised by how hoarse he is. He gazes up at Will, his vision blurred by tears, and reaches for his own throat, unknotting his tie with fingers that are clumsy under Will's hungry gaze. He manages to get his shirt open, pulling it down to the collar of his waistcoat to expose the flushed and tender skin of his neck, and the little scent gland under his jaw swells under the Omega's scrutiny. It throbs in time to his heartbeat, and he cannot suppress his shudder when Will brushes two fingertips across it.

'You bit me,' Will murmurs, standing with a foot on either side of Hannibal's leg, his hardness nudging Hannibal's ribs, his hands on the other man's face, forcing him to tilt his head back. 'You bonded me, and then you broke open my mind…'

Hannibal's heart throws itself against the walls of his chest. Blood roars in his ears, deafening him, and all he can see is Will's face; his violent beauty and fierce grace. Golden eyes sear him, melting his bones, and he makes no move to resist as the Omega lowers his mouth to his throat. He couldn't, even if he wanted to.

Will nuzzles his Alpha's scent gland, the little nub jumping up against his tongue. The skin tastes sweet as syrup, tingling and burning hot, and is such a concentrated essence of Hannibal's scent that it makes his mouth water.

I love you.

Snarling, he clamps his jaws around Hannibal's windpipe, grabbing fistfuls of ashen hair to hold him steady as he bites. His fangs pierce the skin, one tooth nicking the gland, and the shockwaves when the blood hits his tongue has him reeling.

Mine.

Hannibal cries out and grabs tight to Will's waist, trying to shove the coat aside to get at the skin beneath. His Omega has his mouth locked around his throat, growling and purring as he suckles on the scent-rich blood, and Hannibal's entire body spasms with pleasure at the penetration.

Only you, Will. It's only ever been you. I love you.

The room shimmers, the edges blurring as their minds remake it in their secret place, their shared palace, together. Will can see himself bent over the other man, holding his life in the balance, even as he closes his eyes to savor the feel of Hannibal's heartbeat against his lips. He moans, a low, wanton sound, and releases his mate's torn flesh to lap at the trickling blood.

Will's tongue, rasping back and forth over his stinging, suck-bruised skin, makes Hannibal's hips jump, and the movement makes him judder. He falls forwards onto his hands and knees as Will stumbles backwards, grabbing for his mauled throat and feeling for the wounds.

'You're okay,' Will promises, his voice rough. He wraps an arm around Hannibal's shoulders to help him back up, steadying him when Hannibal staggers to his feet. 'It's not that deep.'

Hannibal doesn't reply; just captures his mouth in a desperate kiss. He tastes his own musk and blood on Will's lips, and plunders his mate's sweet insides, sucking him down until they're both arching and rocking against each other, hands bruising each other's hips and buttocks as they try to meld their bodies into one.

'Let me see,' Will gasps, breaking the kiss to nuzzle along Hannibal's jawline and admire his work. He purrs, licking one final stripe up the front of Hannibal's spit-soaked throat, his shadow a swollen, pulsing cloud of pride when he sees the delicate Alpha crest begin to appear. The bite is vicious; a ring of teeth-marks right over Hannibal's windpipe. But, where the little scent gland has been damaged, there is now a thin white scar forming in a vertical line down his throat, thickening even as he watches.

‘It’s beautiful,’ he whispers, tears welling in his eyes. He presses a tender kiss to the mark and Hannibal shivers, lifting his chin up in easy submission.

He is Will’s, now, as surely as Will is his.

‘Let me clean your wounds,’ the Alpha murmurs, twining their fingers together. Will looks down, blinking in confusion when he sees his cracked knuckles, the intensity of bonding with Hannibal overshadowing the rest of the evening.

I killed a man, tonight. I killed him, and I liked it.

He nods dumbly, staying close to Hannibal’s side as his Alpha leads him into the kitchen. Hannibal moves briskly, but his fingers stray to his own throat every few seconds, and he smiles when he glimpses his reflection in the polished glass of the oven door. He notices Will’s gaze becoming distant, his blue eyes stormy and conflicted, and hurries to gather up his supplies before returning to the dining room.

They shed their coats and sit beside each other at the other end of the table, away from Randall’s body. The shadows gather about them, hugging them close as Hannibal pours warm water into a casserole dish. He presses Will’s hand flat, breaking the seal on the scabs and releasing curls of blood, which hang like smoke on the surface.

Soaking a cotton pad, Hannibal wipes away the sweat and dirt from his Omega’s injuries, watching closely as the truth of what he’s done – killed a man, bonded an Alpha, *reveled in it* – settles like a weight on his shoulders.

‘Don’t go inside, Will.’ He speaks softly but firmly, injecting what little Alpha assertiveness he can summon. ‘You’ll want to retreat.’

Don’t go into that darkness alone.

‘You’ll *want* it, as the glint of the rail tempts us when we hear the approaching train.’ He sniffs, and touches his bite. ‘Stay with me.’

Will’s lips twist, and tears blur his vision as he watches Hannibal dry off his wound.

‘Where else would I go?’

Winding a clean bandage around Will’s hand, Hannibal takes the opportunity to stroke his partner’s palm, comforting him with his scent, if not his presence.

‘You have everywhere to go.’ He can’t help but smile, a rich purr rumbling in his throat. ‘You should be quite pleased… I am.’

‘Of *course* you are,’ Will mutters, rolling his eyes. He looks away, a faint tremor wracking his shoulders. He did it… He really did it… He killed someone, and not in defense of a life. He bonded Hannibal… He’s never getting away from him, now.

Hannibal tilts his head, hands stilling on the gauze.

‘When you killed Randall, did you fantasize you were killing me?’ he asks gently, his tone carefully free of judgement.

Will hesitates, and then turns to face him. He looks his Alpha deep in the eyes, his irises a rich, swirling gold, and though he doesn’t nod, his answer is plain to see.

Yes.

Hannibal’s eyes flare crimson at the rush of sweet arousal. At the way his darkness curls around Will’s shadow, protecting and caressing it. Forever.

‘Most of what we do, most of what we *believe,* is motivated by death,’ he offers, rewarded by Will’s lips parting. His Omega takes in a quick, shaky breath and, when he speaks, his voice is barely more than a whisper.

‘I’ve never felt as *alive* as I did when I was killing him…’

I liked it.

Hannibal smiles, another low purr rumbling in his throat.

‘Then you owe Randall Tier a debt,’ he murmurs, returning to Will’s dressing so as not to lose control and yank him into a kiss. He swallows, feeling the pleasant lump in his throat where his crest is developing. Glances at the body of the dead Alpha and grows still. ‘How will you repay him?’

Will follows his gaze, excitement bubbling within him, threatening to spill out as his shadow swells, fueled by his Alpha’s faith in him.

‘He wanted to be like the Alphas of old,’ he says, pushing to his feet with his gaze locked on the body of his victim. ‘He was a Primal… A beast in the body of a man…’

Baring his teeth, he reaches down and links his fingers with Hannibal’s, tugging him up to hold him from behind. He curls into the embrace, arching his back and rolling his ass back against his mate’s answering hardness, baring the side of his throat even as he crosses their joined arms across the baby sleeping in his belly.

He looks down at the corpse and hums, a smile curving his lips.

‘I’m going to give him the body he deserves.’

***

An anonymous tip leads Jack Crawford to the Baltimore Museum of Natural History at two o’clock in the morning. The air parts for him as he descends into the Hall of Predators, his heart sinking as the smell of blood becomes stronger with every step.

Tell me you didn’t…

It's a futile hope. As he stares at the waxy, bruised skin of Randall Tier, Jack's heart sinks and is replaced with hollow despair.

The murdered Alpha has been dismembered, his body parts glued and screwed to the bones and resin cast replicas of an ancient saber-tooth cat skeleton. It's grotesque; a mockery of everything the man thought he'd been. The display is brutal, and Jack can't keep from staring at it. At the scuffed eyes, the red irises faded in death. At the lower jaw, sawn off and replaced with that of the cat. The arms, removed at the shoulder and deboned, limp flesh then wrapped around the skeleton's forelegs…

Claws jut out from the ripped fingertips of the Alpha's hands, and dried blood smears across the shattered glass all around the podium, as if he's just come alive and sprung free from the display.

A Primal Alpha, after all.

If it weren't so sick, Jack thinks he might have been impressed. But it *is* sick, and it terrifies him.

Have I lost you to that darkness, Will, or were you never really mine in the first place?

***

By the time he returns from the Natural History Museum, Will is so hard it hurts. He sheds his jacket on his way to the study and leaves it draped over the end of the bannister, hands reaching for his shirt collar as he crosses the threshold into the side room. He had left Hannibal at the house, wanting to surprise him with the tableau when Jack inevitably summons them to the crime scene.

He estimates they have about an hour, maybe less, before they get the call and have to leave. He doesn't want to waist a second of it, now that Hannibal is finally *his*.

'Take your clothes off,' he growls, tossing the garment aside.

Hannibal looks up from his book, desire quickly replacing surprise when he sees his Omega's flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. Will is half-naked already, chest heaving and still smeared with blood from whatever delightful display he has created.

He stands, abandoning the novel beside his glass of brandy, moving to meet Will when the smaller man hurries to embrace him.

'You look –'

Will kisses him, biting his lower lip to silence him, swallowing his dying words before the Alpha simply purrs. Hannibal's heart skips a beat with excitement at the taste and smell of Will – copper blood, wildfire and smoke, sweet musk and vanilla aftershave – and he toes off his shoes and socks, clumsily unzipping his trousers and shoving them, and his briefs, down his legs, glad that he shed his suit jacket, waistcoat and tie earlier. Hot, impatient hands tug at the buttons of his shirt, and Hannibal hears threads snap as Will snarls under his breath, eager

to get at the flesh beneath. He feels himself stiffen at the attention, and the low ache at Will's return quickly sharpens into a gnawing, desperate need for pleasure.

'Unbuckle my jeans,' the Omega orders, kicking off his boots and pushing Hannibal's shirt from his shoulders at the same time.

Hannibal obeys, pulling damp boxers down with them to reveal Will's curving, quivering length. His Omega's scent rises, thicker than ever, salty and sweet, and Hannibal's mouth waters, his own irises prickling red as he takes in the offering.

Before he can think to do anything, though, a rough shove has him stumbling backwards, and Hannibal finds himself pushed towards the sofa with Will at his mouth, capturing his sounds of surprise. His knees hit the edge of the seat and he falls, Will following to straddle his lap, squeezing with slick-soaked thighs and moaning with beautiful abandonment against his lips.

Hannibal gazes up at him, battered with emotions too strong for words, too strong for just him. He feels himself reaching for Will, for his mind and his body, just as Will reaches for him, and, where they meet, there is a glowing sense of peace. Of unity.

'Fuck me,' Will gasps, spreading his palms flat over Hannibal's broad, hairy chest, nuzzling up under his Alpha's jaw to suckle at the burning crest on his throat. 'Alpha… *Hannibal*… Please…'

'Will…' Hannibal's hips jump of their volition, fire snapping down his spine to burn every inch of him. Lightning strikes with every rasp of Will's tongue on the sensitive scar, and pleasure threatens to undo him. He grips the other man's waist tight enough to bruise, balancing the knife-edge between ecstasy and Rut.

'You're *mine*,' Will whispers, reaching down to take Hannibal's throbbing hardness in one hand, guiding it back and humming softly as the head nudges up between his damp ass cheeks.

'I am,' Hannibal rumbles, reaching up to cup the back of Will's neck. 'And you are.'

He holds him firmly, locking him in place with a palm over his Omegan crest, staring deep into the swirling blue and gold of Will's gorgeous eyes as he sinks, inch by inch, into the hot, silky vice of his body.

'I am,' Will gasps, a keening whimper escaping him at the relentless breach. His insides clench and then part, surrendering to the invasion. It's a delicious ache, a faint zing as Hannibal hits *just* the right spot, creating a sense of bone-deep *completeness* at how right it feels to be connected to his mate like this.

Hannibal can feel his pulse pushing up against the tender bite over his windpipe, reminding him, with every beat, that he is Will's, just as Will is *his*. He rolls his pelvis, withdrawing a fraction before plunging back up into his Omega's welcoming heat, groaning at the way Will tightens and strokes him from tip to root.

Will shudders, already close to climax just from Hannibal touching him again. He presses his forehead to the Alpha's, rocking down to meet every thrust, his toes curling and hands gripping tight to Hannibal's silky hair and bunching muscles. His mate is so perfectly lean; so strong and compact, defined but still slim. Will abandons his hair to run his hands over Hannibal's torso, feeling the flare of his ribs and the edges of an old cigarette burn. He drops scalding kisses to Hannibal's sharp cheekbones and jaw, heedless to the high purr spilling from his lips as he fills himself with the taste and smell and feel of his mate.

I love you.

'Will…' Hannibal cards his fingers through his Omega's thick curls, his breath catching at the way Will moves his body, undulating and pulling him ever deeper, muscles working to squeeze and stroke him ever closer to completion. He feels a dribble of sweat roll down his back, and wipes at the wetness gathering on Will's forehead, their joined breath making the air grow thick and muggy between them.

'I'm here,' Will whispers. 'I'm here. I'm here, I'm here.'

He captures Hannibal's mouth in a lingering kiss, tears slipping from his lashes to roll down his cheeks and splash onto the Alpha's chest, everything growing hotter and tighter, spiraling up and up and up until –

Hannibal gasps, holding Will tight as his Omega comes with a sharp cry. Hot seed splashes between their bodies, and Will groans as he bears down around him. Hannibal bucks up, burying himself as deeply inside the other man as he can possibly get, snarling his pleasure as white fire crashes through him, every drop of seed coaxed from him by Will's body.

He strikes, sinking his teeth deep into the muscle of Will's shoulder, another wave of climax hitting him at the taste of his blood, honey-sweet and tingling with life. He feels his knot swell, locking them together, and only relaxes back against the cushions when the last vestiges of his orgasm have subsided.

Will follows him, unwilling to be parted for more than a moment. He makes himself small, snuggling up against Hannibal's bare chest and dipping his head to rest his cheek on the Alpha's shoulder. Hannibal wraps heavy arms around Will's smaller body, cradling him close and nuzzling at the wet curls near his temple, content to just breathe each other in until Jack's inevitable interruption.

Staring sightlessly across the study, Will traces idle patterns in the droplets of sweat on Hannibal's skin. He feels exhausted, but even if Jack wasn't about to call him, he doesn't think he'd be able to sleep. His mind is oddly silent, in the same way the world holds its breath before a storm, though the idea of what comes next for them isn't as terrifying as it used to be.

There's no going back.

'I didn't think it would feel this way,' he murmurs, and Hannibal hums his agreement. The other man strokes his hair, settling a broad palm over the back of his skull, the other falling to the small of Will's back, where his thumb rubs up and down the cooling flesh.

‘The Renaissance philosopher, Palmieri, held the belief that the ideal partnership was as equals,’ Hannibal says, slipping his fingers down to Will’s crest, bringing his other up to touch his own. ‘He posited that only a Pair Bond between an Alpha and Omega could bring true harmony to a mating, and a marriage, and thus benefit society as a whole.’

‘I like the sound of him,’ Will murmurs, grinning at his Alpha before leaning in for a slow, tender kiss. Lips press and part, arousal tempered by affection, and they stop only when Will’s cell phone begins to buzz in the pocket of his abandoned jeans.

Will sighs and pulls back, testing Hannibal’s already deflating knot before easing their bodies apart and standing up.

‘That’ll be Jack,’ he says, holding out a hand for his partner. ‘Time to go.’

***

The Natural History Museum is buzzing with activity when they arrive. Jack has already called in crime scene investigators, and cameras flash as they photograph the shards of glass, the surrounding displays and the man-beast itself.

Hannibal slides a pair of blue latex gloves onto his hands, enjoying the smell of death mingling with the scent of Will’s sweat and seed still clinging to the skin beneath his clothes. It is the perfect perfume with which to start a new day.

‘The killer chose *not* to dispose of the body, but to display it.’ Jack’s voice is sharp with disapproval, and Hannibal cannot resist defending his mate by replying,

‘A jarring reminder of the informality of death.’

Jack’s lips thin.

‘Randall Tier was denied the respectful end that he himself denied others,’ he says, and Hannibal nods, crimson-ringed eyes fixed on the offering before him. It is magnificent; muscle and bone woven together in perfect harmony, cartilage stained with blood and each pieces locked together to form a beautiful new whole.

Will has truly outdone himself.

‘This is a humiliation,’ he says, directing his observation at the corpse but knowing that Will can hear him as the Omega approaches. ‘A final indignity.’

He wasn’t worthy of you, and you have shown everyone that with this display.

‘He isn’t mocking him,’ Will replies, frowning at his own creation, facing it head on and keeping both Alphas in his line of sight as they stand on either side of Randall. ‘This isn’t disdain. He’s… commemorating him.’

Jack frowns, and Hannibal clamps down on the flash of jealousy at Will’s words.

‘This killer has no fear for the consequences of what he’s done,’ he says, glancing over at his mate. Will can feel how thick the gold of band must be in his eyes, and he can smell the tang of worry in Jack’s musk, but he doesn’t care.

‘No guilt?’ he murmurs, steadfastly ignoring the furious expression on Jack’s face. He takes a step closer to the display, the dark current rising within him, and Hannibal’s shadow twists with it, slithering across the space between them to join him in his reconstruction.

He closes his eyes, falling into black nothing, and then…

The pendulum swings. Honeyed light and searing heat. The present falls away, taking all thought, all emotion, all *sense* of self with it. He’s drowning; ripped from his body until there’s nothing left but thought.

When Will opens his eyes, he is alone in the museum. Every breath echoes, and the smell of death can rise, unimpeded by strangers.

A low purr rumbles in his throat. There’s no one here but *them.*

‘Hello, again.’

Randall’s face is eerily still. The skin is waxy, and bruised where it stretches tight across the bone. Will can feel his pulse in his fingertips. In his tongue. Even his teeth.

Reality shifts, and then Randall blinks, his scuffed irises glowing crimson.

‘Come closer,’ the dead Alpha croons, his frozen, immobile arms reaching out for him. ‘I want to *see* you, little Omega.’

Will swallows, tasting Randall’s blood. Tasting Hannibal’s blood… He bit them both. Broke them both…

He moves around the display, checking his work. Admiring the truth that he revealed from inside Randall’s mind, just as Hannibal revealed the truth inside his own.

‘Can *you* see you?’ Randall asks, and Will’s crest swells up to brush against the silk lining of his shirt.

‘Clearer and clearer.’

The air trembles, and Will senses another presence in his mind. Another predator, watching over him. Hannibal is on the outside, looking in, but the beast that Will senses now is of his own making. He *understands* Randall; made a connection to him when he killed him and tore him apart. It is the rival Alpha that he sees in the corner of his eye; naked and whole but for the saber fangs curving down from his broken upper jaw.

‘You forced me to kill you,’ Will says, staring at the display, ignoring the growing heat in his nape. Ignoring it, and what it means.

I liked killing him.

‘I didn’t force you to enjoy it,’ Randall replies, and Will shivers as unseen fingers tickle up and down his spine. As warm breath ghosts across the shell of his ear…

Randall purrs, and it is like liquid fire.

‘You made me a *monument*.’

‘You’re welcome,’ Will mutters, frowning at his shoes, tracing the path his mate would have taken as he inspected the body.

‘The monument is not to me,’ Randall says, projecting the words directly into Will’s mind, his mouth too full of animal teeth to make a sound. ‘It’s to you.’

‘I gave you what you *want*,’ Will growls, his eyes boring into the gaps between Randall’s flaring ribs. ‘This is who you *are*.’

Thud-thud. Thud-thud…

Heat slides up his spine, pulsing in time to his heartbeat. Will’s shirt clings to his back, and sweat prickles his forehead despite the cold air around him.

‘What you feel *finally* matches the reality of what I *see*,’ he whispers, and Randall’s answering purr makes his gut clench with pride.

‘This is my *becoming*,’ Randall breathes, reaching out to squeeze Will’s shoulder. His thumb skates dangerously close to his crest, and Will’s pupils blow wide as pleasure ripples out across his scalp. ‘And,’ the Alpha adds, coming up behind him and pulling Will against his cold, dead body, ‘It’s *yours*.’

Will shudders, his knuckles white as he clenches his hands into fists at his sides.

‘This is *my* design.’

He comes back to himself, Hannibal and Jack flanking him, each Alpha’s scent coating and protecting him. Hannibal is a fraction closer, right where Randall Tier was stood, and Will can *feel* the real pride radiating from his mate, sparking black fire through their bond.

‘He knew his killer,’ Will says, his voice still shaky from his imagined conversation with Randall. ‘There’s a… *familiarity* here.’

It was intimate.

‘Someone who met him. Understood him.’ He hears Hannibal’s measured breath and he knows his Alpha is struggling to repress a purr. ‘Someone like him,’ he adds, and Jack’s scent sharpens with distress. Before he can say anything, though, Will continues, ‘Different pathology. Same instinct.’

Jack narrows his eyes at the back of his former Omega’s head. *What are you doing, Will?*

‘His killer empathized with him?’ he asks, and they all know who he means when he mentions empathy.

‘Don’t mistake understanding for empathy, Jack.’ Will’s shoulder’s tighten with resentment. ‘No. If it’s anything it’s… *envy*.’

‘Envy?’ Jack balks at this, but Hannibal merely narrows his eyes at his mate, willing a sense of comfort and acceptance into his Omega’s open mind.

‘Randall Tier came into his own much easier than–’ Will pauses. Swallows. *Me*. ‘Whoever killed him.’

‘This is a fledgling killer,’ Hannibal says, hoping to soothe Will. It took time, yes, and a bitter struggle, but this is a victory, nonetheless. ‘He’s never killed before.’

The bullet-torn body of Garrett Jacob Hobbs comes, unbidden, to his mind. By the tilt of Will’s head, Hannibal knows it is him thinking it, and sending it through their link. But that was different. That was in defense of Abigail’s life. With Randall, there was no such lie.

‘Not like this,’ he adds, and Will turns back to Randall’s body, all but nodding.

‘Not like this, no.’ His gut twists and he tastes copper on his tongue. ‘This is the nightmare that followed him out of his dreams.’

I’m always with you, now.

Jack moves around to stand in Will’s peripheral.

‘Do you think he’ll kill again?’ he asks, unsurprised when Will glances towards Hannibal. The two men share a look, a moment that lasts an eternity, and Jack shivers at everything that is said in the dancing shadows of their eyes.

Then Will is facing him again, his features tight with exhaustion, and Jack *knows* what he’s about to say, and it takes all his resolve not to take the Omega into his arms right there, shake some sense into him and march him back to Dr Bloom’s office for a proper psych eval.

Will sighs at the panic bleeding red into Jack’s irises. He can’t give both Alphas what they want. Not here.

Maybe he never could.

‘He’s just getting started.’

***

Will’s silence is not unexpected during the drive back to the townhouse. Hannibal had offered to drive then both to Wolf Trap, reasoning that he had a change of clothes in the car, but Will declined, saying that he wanted to spend some time alone.

‘You can come by later,’ he adds, glancing at the stony figure of his Alpha beside him. ‘Once I’ve had a chance to clean up.’

Hannibal’s grip relaxes on the steering wheel and the fingers of his left hand stray to the collar of his shirt. He loosens his tie and undoes the first two buttons so he can stroke the tingling scar of his bonding crest.

‘Does the shirt bother it?’ Will asks, without turning his gaze from the window. ‘I’ve had to line all of mine with silk.’

‘The pressure serves as a reminder of its presence,’ Hannibal replies, feeling his pulse push up against the raised flesh. ‘Historically, Alphas wore silk neck scarves with their shirts to ease the discomfort. Then, in the Victorian era, it was considered a mark of strength to endure the touch of starched linen against one’s crest. Modern fashion, it seems, still holds this sentiment.’

‘That, or so few Alphas these days are bonded back that it doesn’t seem worth changing it,’ Will suggests, staring past his own reflection to watch the streetlamps of Baltimore flicker off as the sun rises higher above the horizon, red bleeding into the sky to bruise the inky blue a warm purple, instead. ‘Unlike Omegan fashion, which seeks to flaunt their crests by cutting everything low in the back.’

‘An old tradition,’ Hannibal says, signaling and turning down the long, tree-lined road leading to his house. ‘One that has only recently been revived.’

‘Not for me,’ Will mutters, and Hannibal spares him a single, knowing smile, thinking of his partner’s wardrobe; plaid shirts meant for Betas, hand-altered to include a patch of silk below the collar to protect the sensitive nape, as boxy and ill-fitting as his trousers. Hannibal’s few Omegan offerings have had to be carefully selected; the slim shirts fully lined with silk but still masculine in cut, waist darts loosened to hide the fact that the fabric follows the subtle contours of Will’s body.

‘No,’ he agrees, returning his eyes to the road. ‘Not for you.’

Silence descends between them again, and Hannibal contents himself listening to the quiet choir music drifting from his car stereo whilst he waits for Will to speak. It isn’t until they are parked on Hannibal’s driveway, the engine ticking over as it cools, that he does.

‘I felt how much you liked my offering.’

Hannibal’s palms tingle, and he uses every ounce of self-control not to grab Will up into a fierce kiss, take him into his arms and drag him inside to mount and lay claim to him again.

‘It was magnificent,’ he says quietly, his heart skipping a beat when Will gives him a tired, sad smile.

‘It felt so natural,’ the Omega confesses, meeting his eyes and holding the gaze. ‘I could see, before I’d even cut him apart, what I was going to do.’

‘Like a sculptor, envisioning their creation within a block of marble,’ Hannibal replies. He turns to face his mate, reaching out to take one of Will’s hands between both of his own. The air is growing cold within the car, but neither man makes a move to leave. ‘You told Jack Crawford that you were envious of Randall Tier. Do you envy him still?’

Will glances down, watching as Hannibal’s thumbs stroke circles into his palm. Fatigue washes over him, and he feels himself swaying towards the touch, seeking out the warmth and comfort of his partner.

‘No,’ he whispers, tilting his head up for a kiss, brushing his lips back and forth across Hannibal’s before the Alpha takes him by the back of the head and deepens it. Hannibal is respectful, offering his tongue only when Will seeks it out with his own, groaning into the embrace when Will sucks it down like a starving man. He plunders his Omega’s mouth, drinking in his salty-sweet saliva, the taste of him drawing a moan from deep in his throat.

‘Stay,’ he pleads, cupping each side of Will’s face when they finally part for air, their lips swollen and shiny with spit, cheeks pink and eyes glowing. ‘Stay with me.’

But Will shakes his head, breaking free of the grasp, and kicks open the car door without replying. Hannibal growls under his breath and follows suit, hurrying around the front of the Bentley to catch up with Will as he strides towards the Volvo parked at the curb.

‘Will; wait!’

‘Come by later, Hannibal.’ Will fumbles for the keys in his pocket, the headlights flashing when he unlocks the car. Before he can get in, however, Hannibal’s hand shoots out and holds the driver’s door closed, preventing him from escaping.

‘You told Jack Crawford you had only just begun,’ Hannibal says, crowding Will up against the curved edge and towering over him. ‘What did you mean?’

‘Come by *later*, Hannibal,’ Will repeats, but then he hesitates, torn between pushing his Alpha away and hugging him closer. In the end, he settles for resting his hands on Hannibal’s hips, warm beneath the wool of his coat, and brings their foreheads together, sharing breath and then a final, lingering kiss. ‘I just need some time.’

‘A few hours,’ Hannibal agrees, ignoring the churning acid in his stomach and the column of fire-ants marching up his spine at the idea of being separated from his mate for so long. ‘I’ll bring lunch.’

‘Of course you will.’ Will smiles to soften the teasing, and drops a peck on Hannibal’s cheek as the Alpha steps aside. He gets into the car and starts the engine, winding down the window to look up one last time. ‘Have a shower, and get some sleep. I’ll call you when I’m done.’

Hannibal nods, his throat too tight to safely speak. He watches, feigning impassivity, until Will’s taillights disappear around the corner at the end of his street, and then clenches his hands into shaking fists.

A few hours. He only has to wait a few hours, and they’ll be together again.

He looks forward to the day when they will never be apart.

***

Driving away from Hannibal is like tearing off his skin, one layer at a time. The steering wheel creaks under his grip, and Will's jaw aches from grinding his teeth.

He *can't* become too dependent on the other man. He can't. Not when he knows what's going to happen. What *has* to happen.

He turns on the radio, fiddling with the dial until jazz music crackles through the speakers and fills the crushing silence. The heaters are next; he was warm with Hannibal but ice now turns his blood to sludge, and his lips are tingling. He keeps blinking, trying to clear the haze so he can drive safely, and catches himself rubbing his stomach, comforting himself with the knowledge that his baby, at least, is with him.

There's something so foreign about family…

He remembers speaking those words to Hannibal, when he'd been helping with the child-killer investigation. He'd said he didn't want children, and now, here he is, impregnated by a fucking cannibalistic serial killer.

Folie à deux. Madness shared by two… They say madness runs in families… Is that what I've done to this child?

He worries his lower lip until it bleeds, and almost misses the turn off the interstate because he's so entrenched in black fantasies about the future. Possibilities branch out before him like the forking of a river, but no matter how hard he tries to see a way forward, there is only darkness.

He'll drive himself mad with it if he's not careful.

The appearance of his farmhouse is a welcome distraction from the buzzing thoughts, and Will's lips quirk into a half-smile when the porch light flicks on at his arrival, prompting a flurry of barks and yips as the dogs realize he's home.

Parking the Volvo in its usual spot, he lets the pack out into the front yard without looking at the sheet of plastic fluttering over his shattered window; without acknowledging the streaks of blood, claw marks and bits of bone littering his floor.

I've never felt so alive.

Will touches a finger to his teeth, remembering the moment's pause before they broke through Hannibal's flesh, nicking the gland to form the Alphan crest. He'd held his mate's life in his mouth, and he'd let him live. Bonded them, more thoroughly than most pairs ever dared.

A wet nose brushes his other palm and Will jumps, snapped from his reverie. He looks down to see Winston sat at his side, head cocked and bright eyes fixed solemnly on his face.

‘Hey,’ Will whispers, dropping to a crouch beside the collie-cross. Seeing him interact with one of them, the remaining five dogs trot over, gathering around and underneath him, licking at his cheeks and fingers as he pets them all in turn. Will can’t help but chuckle at the lengths Underbite and Bruce will go to get themselves as physically close to him as possible; he ends up straddling the brown Lab-cross and holding Underbite up as she balances on Dolly, the Shih-tzu.

‘Y’know,’ Will says, giving his oldest dog a gentle chin rub as she endures her daughter’s antics, ‘*I* have no intention of allowing my children to climb all over me. That’s what Hannibal is for.’

He chuckles at the imagined look from his dog, already knowing that he *will* be the one tumbling on the carpet with his kids, if for no other reason than to be close to them. Hannibal, most likely, will step in only to teach them languages and music, art and cooking.

And killing.

Sobered once more by the harsh truth of his reality, Will pushes himself up with a sigh and sets about tidying up. His exhaustion is creeping back in, dragging at his limbs and stealing his strength. The bathroom is last, and, by the time he’s finished cleaning it, he can barely keep his eyes open long enough to call the vets to check in on Buster.

‘He’s doing just fine, Mr. Graham. A few stitches and a course of antibiotics. He’ll be ready to go home by lunchtime.’

The relief is sweet enough to squeeze tears from his eyes, and Will hoarsely promises to be there to collect him as soon as he’s ready. Then he staggers to his bed, gives it a cursory wipe to clear away shards of glass from the window, and is asleep before his head hits the pillow.

Just a few hours, and his family will be together again.

***

Hannibal arrives at precisely noon. He parks beside Will’s car and steps out into freezing air, his shoes crunching through the snow as he makes his way to the house. The dogs greet him at the door and he counts them off as he pets them, noting one’s absence. Shrugging out of his coat, he hangs it beside Will’s waxed jacket and turns to see his beloved lying flat on his back, fully dressed, on the rumpled covers of his bed.

Smiling, he holds himself steady and walks, silently, into the kitchen, placing the Tupperware on the counter before returning without waking his mate. Will’s curls frame his face, and his jaw is lax in sleep, though his eyes move beneath the bruised lids; testament to his vivid dreams.

Hannibal climbs onto the bed and stretches out along Will’s side, propped up on an elbow so he can look down at him. He strokes Will’s forehead and the scratchy beard of his cheek, tipping his head and smiling when the Omega begins to stir.

Will feels the dark current rise and then recede within him, like the tide pulling back to expose the sand to the elements. He shivers, moving into the touch, seeking comfort, desperately blinking away the last vestiges of his nightmare. An endless corridor, lined with doors, each one symbolizing a choice. Each a trap, just as surely as the corridor itself…

Feeling Will tremble, Hannibal gathers the smaller man into his arms and hugs him close, nuzzling his temple until Will softens against him. He doesn't ask what the dream was about; if Will wants to tell him, he shall, most likely in one of their therapy sessions. He simply holds him, pleased with the way Will's scent returns to its typical sugary musk, carrying with it just a hint of cedarwood and cloves, in sync with his own.

Will licks his dry lips, realizing how *thirsty* he is when he swallows and croaks,

'How long've you been here?'

'Not long,' Hannibal murmurs. He pulls away and stands up, leaving to fetch Will a glass of cold water. Will swings his legs out of bed and sits up, rolling his shoulders until they pop. He accepts the drink when his Alpha returns, gulping half of it down without pause, taking a breath and then finishing the rest in another two swallows. His breath fogs the rim, and it fades only slowly when he sets it aside.

'Thanks.'

Hannibal nods, his eyes straying from the movement of Will's throat to land on the sheet of plastic stapled across the broken window. His mouth tightens, and he is surprised by the level of *anger* he feels at knowing the dead Alpha damaged his mate's property.

'Did that happen when Randall attacked you?' he asks, nostrils flaring when Will nods. He moves closer, peering behind the sheet to inspect the glittering shards still clinging to the edges of the frame. Reaches out a thumb to test the sharpness and watches, impassively, as blood wells from the cut.

Will's breath hitches and he stands up when Hannibal turns back to him. The Alpha holds out the wound in silent offering and Will takes it between his own. His palms are hot against Hannibal's cool skin, and his lips burn when he brings the cut up to his mouth.

Keeping his eyes locked on his mate's, Will runs the tip of his tongue over the torn flesh, gathering up the holly-red blood and then holding it there, waiting to be shared.

'I've never been more proud of you,' Hannibal whispers, closing the last distance between them, 'than when I saw what you did to Randall Tier.'

The air parts for them and then Hannibal wraps his lips around Will's tongue, swallowing down the coppery taste of himself. His Alphan crest throbs, pleasure crackling through every nerve in his body. He moans softly and Will responds by sliding his arms around his waist, deepening the kiss to taste every inch of his mouth. A purr rattles in the Omega's throat when Hannibal mirrors the hold, and Will arches his spine into the embrace, smiling when Hannibal drops one hand to grab his ass, hauling him against his hips.

‘I’ve *missed* you,’ Hannibal breathes, pushing the words against Will’s lips, desperate to see him and yet unwilling to release him.

‘I hate missing *you*,’ Will replies, allowing one more kiss before pushing Hannibal away. He grins at the pained whine Hannibal makes, and then inclines his head towards the kitchen. ‘Shall we?’

‘Of course,’ Hannibal manages, steeling himself to part from his mate. The threads, newly formed with their reunion, snap like gossamer strands, and he holds his breath against the crushing disappointment as he forces each foot before the other, all the way to the kitchen.

‘Hurts, doesn’t it?’ Will asks, following close behind, watching the strain on his partner’s shoulders. ‘Imagine how it felt to be *locked up*, apart from the person you need the most.’

Hannibal pauses, considering Will’s words. *Truly* considering how the other man must have felt during his incarceration.

‘I hope, one day, to make amends for your suffering,’ he says quietly, and Will narrows his eyes, moving around to stand beside him. Despite himself, he reaches down and twines their fingers together, giving Hannibal’s hand a comforting squeeze.

One way or another, you will.

‘Let’s eat.’

***

Returning to normalcy on Monday is unnerving. Will moves as if in a dream, going through the motions of making toast and scrambled eggs for breakfast, giving Hannibal a long, parting kiss at the front door and bidding him a safe drive back to Baltimore. The Alpha has patients, and Will…

Will has a date with Freddie Lounds.

The journalist is holed up in a mid-level motel just north of the city. Will doesn’t know if she’s living there or just using it as a base for today’s meeting. He doesn’t really care.

He parks beside her SUV and steels himself for the inevitable, *unpleasant* conversation that must occur. He made a deal, after all. His story, in exchange for the article luring Matthew to him.

A wasted promise.

He raps his knuckles on the painted door; three sharp taps and then a pause. There’s silence, and he wonders if his nerves have betrayed him, stealing the strength from his arm. Knocks again, and a moment later, the door swings away from him to reveal the heart-shaped face, curly red hair and hungry blue eyes of the Alpha herself.

Freddie’s perfume catches in his throat, making him want to retch. It has a sharp, acidic aftertaste; as corrosive as her personality.

Will steps into the room, his silence stony, and Freddie smirks, closing the door behind him and locking them in together.

‘Coffee?’

‘No.’

‘Straight to business, then.’ Freddie smirks, and settles herself on the couch. ‘I’ve upped the ante on my publishing deal,’ she says, watching closely as Will inspects the TattleCrime.com newspaper clippings and photographs of himself, Hannibal and even Dr Du Maurier. ‘There’s been *movie* interest.’

The Omega’s continued silence is irksome, and she decides to prod him a little more by adding,

‘Hollywood is a fine place for the obnoxious and wealthy.’

Will’s lips twist into a sneer and he glances back over his shoulder, his hands still safely tucked into his coat pockets.

‘You’re not *wealthy*, Freddie.’

Freddie grins, her irises edged with red.

‘Oh, I *will* be,’ she purrs. There’s a pause, and then she shrugs. ‘No; I am a *pariah* among journalists because I took a different faith, but I am putting that faith in *you*.’

She sighs, a smile still lingering on her lips, and leans forwards to very *obviously* press the button on her portable voice recorder.

‘Let’s talk about the Chesapeake Ripper,’ she continues, her gaze steely when Will turns towards her. ‘Frederick Chilton… Who knew?’

Will sighs through his nose, returning his gaze to the desk, lighting tracing the wood with a fingertip.

‘Who knew?’ he echoes, the lie hollow in his throat.

‘No one did,’ Freddie says. ‘No one *would*, not even you… *You* were so *certain* the Chesapeake Ripper was Hannibal Lecter, you tried to kill him.’

From his position by the net curtains, Will spares her a single, withering glance.

‘You neglected to say “allegedly”,’ he says.

‘No, I didn’t,’ Freddie replies, an almost awestruck expression on her face. The *strength* it must have taken the Omega to make an attempt on his Alpha’s life…

Will’s lips quirk into a bitter smile, and he moves on, choosing silence over an admission of guilt. He’s learned his lesson about speaking too freely around her.

‘Hannibal Lecter is your psychiatrist again,’ Freddie continues, clasping her hands over crossed legs and tilting her head at him, trying to peel away the layers of façade worn by the Omega. ‘*And* your Alpha… What’s up with that?’

Will shrugs, fists still safely hidden inside his coat pockets, his pacing taking him to the back of the other couch, directly across from Freddie but with barriers between them. She’s surprised he’s not wearing those godawful glasses he likes to hide behind.

‘I was wrong about him,’ he says, the words ringing out in the quiet room. ‘That’s what’s “up” with that.’

Freddie nods, considering his answer.

‘Maybe you were…’ Her gaze sharpens once more and she pierces him with it. ‘Maybe you *weren’t*.’

Will turns, narrowing his eyes even as the edges of his irises flare gold.

‘Dr *Chilton* was the Chesapeake Ripper,’ he says carefully, and Freddie rolls her eyes.

‘The Chesapeake Ripper had surgical skills. Dr Chilton did *not*.’

‘They had the same profile,’ Will replies, moving closer to the second couch as if contemplating sitting down with her.

‘Dr Chilton was a *woeful* surgeon; dangerous, even,’ Freddie says, her tone sharpening as she continues, ‘I’ve been chatting with some of his old medical school chums; they say he fled to psychiatry to avoid *embarrassment*.’

She watches as Will lowers himself onto the faux leather, wondering if he realizes how predatory he looks when he moves. Wondering if he realizes how much he’s changed…

He’s not a scared little lamb, anymore.

‘My story with the Chesapeake Ripper already has an *ending*, Freddie.’ Will fights to keep his voice steady, ignoring the tightness in his throat. The tingling heat of a dark shadow uncoiling in the pit of his stomach…

Freddie’s eyes burn crimson and she leans forwards, snaring his full attention with her sudden movement.

‘Mine *doesn’t*.’ She gives him a sad, knowing little smile, naïve to the dangerous current she is wading into. ‘Do you *really* think Dr *Chilton* killed Abigail Hobbs?’ She doesn’t wait for an answer; just gives a small shake of her head. ‘I *don’t*. Even if I let this story go, I will never let *that* go.’

Will sighs, and sinks back into the couch, folding in on himself as the memory of Abigail’s death, of Hannibal’s *betrayal*, stabs at him. As the Alpha in front of him trap herself with her own arrogance…

This is how it has to happen.

‘Trust me, Freddie…’ He swallows, fighting back the tears pushing at his eyes, ‘Neither will I.’

***

‘You know you will have to kill him, Margot.’

Hannibal keeps his voice calm, his gaze averted to the grey light of a cold winter’s day beyond the tall windows.

‘You’ve known it for years.’

As the Alpha turns his head back to her, dark eyes glinting, Margot Verger sighs and fiddles with the ring on her finger.

‘I may have missed my opportunity,’ she says, acutely aware of the silver collar around her throat. Mason’s choice; a reminder of her social standing and status, no matter the Chanel blazer and jumpsuit.

Pet. Slave. Breeding stock.

‘Do you know why you failed to murder him, Margot?’ Hannibal asks, and Margot offers a tiny shrug, misery etched into her downturned mouth and haunted eyes. No matter the makeup, no matter the crimson paint, she is as fragile as a teacup. Easily broken, poorly repaired.

‘Poor planning,’ she suggests, but Hannibal gives a near-imperceptible shake of his head.

‘You failed to murder your brother because you still love him,’ he explains, thinking of his own sweet Will’s botched attempt on his life. Half-hearted, at best. Rage-fueled and quickly snuffed. ‘In love, you take leave of your senses, but in hatred you must be present to calculate your actions.’

He smiles, watching the darkness growing inside the Omega. Purrs, just once, as a reward for Margot’s good behavior, and adds, almost as an afterthought,

‘Allow yourself to hate him.’

There is silence for a moment, a pause in which to nurture the seed planted deep in Margot’s mind. Hannibal holds her there, like a snake charmer with a cobra, and then breaks the spell with a brisk intake of breath and a new question. Steering the conversation ever onward, to its natural conclusion.

‘Do you think your brother will just *give* you what you want? You’ll be begging him for the rest of your life.’ He narrows his eyes. ‘Did begging help when he tore you? Same thing as taking his chocolate and letting him have his way.’

Margot's flinch, quickly suppressed, does not go unnoticed. She works hard to keep her voice calm, though, and still manages to maintain her steady, bored drawl.

'I'm lucky I didn't kill him. Papa's will was very *clear*. Upon the passing of his beloved son, Mason, in the absence of a legitimate male or Alphan heir, the sole beneficiary shall be the Southern Baptist Convention.'

Margot's eyes flicker gold and her lips pull back from her teeth in an expression more snarl than smile, and Hannibal nods slowly.

'Even in death, Mason would take everything from you.' He wets his lips, considering his next move. 'One of the most powerful forces that shapes us as human beings is the desire to leave a legacy… What legacy would *you* leave behind?'

'I don't *get* a legacy,' Margot replies, her hands tightening in her lap.

Hannibal's irises flicker red.

'Unless you make one.'

***

She always rides after her sessions with Dr Lecter. It's better after her morning appointments; she can saddle Tal and go out across the estate, following whichever trail she fancies most and then looping back around to the big service road leading up to the stables and garages.

Margot slows her Thoroughbred gelding from a canter to a trot, and then down to a walk, mindful of the icy cobbles approaching the barn. The mansion turrets are an oppressive feature against the bleak white of the sky; Papa's design, an addition to the original structure that cost eighteen million dollars and the lives of three Mexican workers. She tries to ignore the churning in her gut as she passes beneath the stone archway leading into the stables, and focuses on the smell of fresh straw, horses and sweet hay.

Ignores the constant squealing and grunting of the Verger pigs Mason *insists* on keeping near to her horses. As if she could forget what family she belongs to.

Handing her reins to a groom, Margot vaults down from the saddle and pushes the nearest stirrup up, securing it in place. This close to the sweating gelding, she can't smell anything else, and, when her brother's nasal voice rings out from behind her, she flinches.

'Have a good ride?' Mason calls, and Margot *knows* she's in trouble. For what, she's not sure. But something.

She pats Tal's neck one last time and hands her crop to the groom.

'Here,' she murmurs. 'Put him away.' She lowers her head, her eyes fixed somewhere near Mason's knees as she turns towards her brother, pulling her gloves from shaking hands. 'What do you want?'

‘What do I want?’ Mason steps closer, emerging from the shadows of the barn and filling Margot’s belly with icy dread. The Beta’s hair is as wild as ever; styled to look windswept, it only serves to accentuate his pudgy cheeks and weak jaw. Behind wire-rimmed glasses, two beady little eyes glow with blue fire, and his fat lips pull back from blunt teeth. ‘What do I want? What do I *want?* What do I *want?’*

Mason’s leather gloves creak as he flexes his hands around the piglet in his arms; the animal is wrapped in a blanket to protect it from the worst of the chill, but it still shivers, though whether from cold or fear, it’s hard to tell. Mason himself is dressed in a grey suit and a white wool coat, the collar trimmed with real mink fur, and his nose shines with oil.

Margot remembers the feel of that nose against her face and nausea swells.

‘I… *want*…’ Mason grins, enjoying the fear turning his sister’s eyes to gold. ‘To… *share* something… with you.’

He crowds up in front of her, the piglet between them, and Margot inevitably drops her gaze to the creature.

‘This is Pavlov,’ Mason explains, jostling his new toy to make it squeal. He might cut its legs off later, to see if its cries sound like the Omega’s. He adopts a cooing, baby voice. ‘Say hello, Pavlov. Say “hello”.’ Glares at his sister and snaps, ‘Margot. Say hello to Pavlov.’

Margot sighs, the air rippling with chocolate-scented heat.

‘Hi, buddy,’ she whispers, fighting tears. She doesn’t want to watch another animal be tortured and killed. Not today.

But Mason seems to have other plans. He holds Pavlov out to the side and one of his cronies immediately relieves him of the animal, whisking it away to wherever it came from. Margot’s relief is fleeting, however; when Mason turns back to her, baring all of his crooked teeth in a feral grin, her stomach drops.

It’s not the animal being tortured, today.

Mason wraps his free arm around her, yanking Margot into his side and then shoving her to walk in front of him, towards the pig pens at the back of the stalls.

‘Take your helmet off,’ he barks, yanking on her braid to halt his sister a moment after she starts walking. The Omega obeys, her hands shaking as she lowers the riding hat to her side, and Mason rips it from her grasp, tossing it away because it doesn’t matter to him.

Then, as they walk, he begins to speak.

‘After Papa died, I had a Christmas epiphany.’

He shoos her ahead of him, almost skipping with glee at the tension in her small frame, and then overtakes to ascend the rickety wooden staircase up to a newly constructed platform before her.

‘I’ve seen exotic pigs from all over the world,’ he continues, waggling his eyebrows at her carefully blank expression. She must be very scared, indeed. ‘What would *happen* if I brought together the *best* of all that I had seen?’

The platform looks out over a large barn, converted specifically for Mason’s entertainment. Margot’s heart hammers in her throat, and she can feel her nape prickling with uncomfortable heat even as submissive pheromones begin to flood out of her pores.

Don’t hurt me. Please, don’t hurt me.

‘You built a maze,’ she says, her voice as bored as ever. ‘I shudder to think.’

The maze is a series of metal tunnels, spiraling out from an open-roofed center, over which an ornate, gilded mirror hangs.

Mason barks a laugh, punching at the air with childish glee.

‘I feel like Stradivarius,’ he says, watching carefully as his Sardinians pull back the barn door to reveal the mud-crusted trailer backed right up to the entrance of the maze. ‘Our father was a *pioneer* in livestock production,’ he continues, turning back to Margot as the men work. ‘I think he’d be… I think he’d be *proud* of my efforts.’

Of course he would, Margot thinks, watching Mason impassively before returning her attention to the maze. *He was just as much of a sadist as you are.*

‘A *pig* is not like other animals,’ Mason says, invading her space again. Smothering her with his sweetly-rotting breath and choking cologne. ‘There is a spark of intelligence. A terrible practically in pigs.’

The pigs emerge from the trailer, entering the maze in a clatter of hooves and a series of grunts and oinks. The Sard oversees it with a taser in one hand, just in case.

‘Well, you *do* have an unparalleled understanding of piggishness.’ Margot can’t stop the reply from escaping her lips, and Mason does his snorting, cackling chuckle, wiping spit away from his lips before it dribbles down his chin.

‘Your mouth gets *rough* when you’re scared, Margot.’ He grins, reaching out and cuffing her, none-too-gently, on the chin with his fist. ‘Tough as a livery pony who is resentful of the bit.’

He turns their attention back to the maze.

‘The *structure* is designed to *excite* and *antagonize* the pigs. It’s taken a while to find the perfect mix.’

Behind them, another Sardinian ascends the stairs, carrying with him a sack suspiciously shaped like a body. Margot turns, watching with growing dread as he places it on the table beneath an electronic hook, and begins to unwrap it…

‘Any pig will eat a dead man,’ Mason explains, watching her with sick hunger. ‘But to get him to eat a live one… some… *education* is required.’

The Sardinian Alpha pulls what looks like a burnt corpse from the sack. Margot's heart lurches and then she realizes it is meat, sewn together in the shape of a person. A slight person, wearing an Omegan-cut Dior blazer and pants…

'*Carlo* is experienced in this field,' Mason adds, almost bouncing with joy, now. 'He actually *fed* a man to pigs in Tuscany… twenty years ago?'

Carlo glances up, a bottle of Margot's perfume in his hands, and nods. Spritzes the suit with her scent, two, three times, and Margot thinks she might be sick.

'That's one of my suits…'

'I'll buy you a new one,' Mason replies, deliberately misunderstanding her concern. He turns back to the demonstration, gesturing with both hands, now, as fired up as she's ever seen him. 'We stuff the clothes with meat, scent it with human smells and play the screams *every* time they are fed…' He grins. 'Come the real thing, we won't need the recording.'

He plucks a remote from his pocket and hits play. Immediately, an Omega's distinctive cries of pain blast out of the stereos hooked up all around the barn, and Margot's skin crawls at the sound of it. It could be her. It may well be; Mason's probably taped all of their 'sessions' together.

Below them, the pigs begin to kick and snort, stampeding against the bars of the maze in a trained response to the screams. Margot can feel her eyes blazing gold, and her vision blurs before tears roll down her cheeks.

Mason is going to feed me to his pigs.

'It's not just about making Papa proud,' Mason says, gazing up at the hanging duplicate of his sister, stepping aside as Carlo cranks the hoist to lift the dummy up and over the viewing balcony and down towards the pigs. 'It's about *us*,' the Beta continues, drawing closer to Margot, his leather gloves now clutched in one sweating fist, cheeks flushed with pleasure. 'It's about *family*.'

He comes up behind his sister and takes her by the upper arms, rocking his erection towards her ass and spilling damp breath over the back of her neck, her nape barely protected by the flimsy silk scarf she's wound about her throat.

'I want you to be proud of me, too, Margot.' Mason shudders against her, working himself into a frenzy, and Margot locks her eyes onto the replica of herself, trying to pretend this isn't happening. Trying to pretend it's not her brother's cock nudging her ass cheeks between their layers of clothing…

'You're all I have,' Mason croons, watching closely to make sure she's paying full attention to the show in front of her. 'And, er…' He smiles, watching as the body jerks with the first bite from a hungry pig, feeling an answering twitch in Margot's shoulders. He leans even closer, until he can brush his hot lips over her ear, and wiggles his wet tongue into the crease just beneath her lobe. 'I'm *all* you have.'

The body jerks, rocks and then falls into the pit, crushed and chewed and ripped by tusks and teeth. Margot can feel herself shaking but she doesn't have it in her to stop; Mason made his point, and he made it *well*. She can see the destruction reflected in the mirror, and she can imagine all too well her own future; she'll be torn apart a piece at a time, dying in slow agony as Mason sits high above her, sipping a tear-flavored Martini, laughing as she cries for help…

Bile stings her throat as Mason comes with a wet groan against her back. His fingers crush bruises into her biceps as he savors the fear and pain he's caused, and his eyes glaze over with visions of fucking deep into his sister's mangled remains.

He dips his head closer to Margot's ear, his breath hot against her skin, and purrs,

'And *this* little piggy went "eeee-eeeee-eeee!"…' He chuckles, lifting one hand to grab the nape of Margot's neck, locking her in place. 'All the way *home*.'

There's no escape, little sister. I can do whatever I want to do. And there is nothing you can do to stop me.

***

Two days later, Margot drives out to Wolf Trap with a bottle of whiskey and a pack of Omegan Heat stimulants. Her previous advice, that Omegas become more fertile when first pregnant, is the very thing she needs to be true right now.

The chances of producing an Alpha nearly double when both parents are Omegas. Will Graham is her best option, and Margot Verger is nothing if not pragmatic. She may be a lesbian, but this isn't about pleasure. This is about securing her legacy and putting an end to her suffering.

One night with the wrong gender is a small price to pay for a lifetime free from rape and torture.

Taking a deep breath, she knocks twice and then steps back to wait, staring out across the stark, snowy land surrounding the farmhouse, her heart hammering in her chest and palms sweating inside expensive leather gloves.

She has no idea how Will is going to react to her proposal, but this far from his Alpha, she can manipulate his need for closeness. For comfort.

Dogs whine and are quickly shushed. Footsteps approach and then Will unlocks the front door, pulling it towards him as Margot opens the porch door. She holds up the bottle, letting the amber liquid catch the light, and Will's suspicious frown softens into something more curious.

'I've come to replenish your stores,' Margot explains, tipping her head a fraction, baring the side of her neck in a gesture of submission. Wrapped as she is in a thick fur coat, she has no need for a scarf, and she sees Will's gold-ringed eyes linger on her throat.

She grins, knowing he's intrigued as to her visit, and sways past him in a waft of her best Omegan perfume.

She took three of the Heat stimulants in the car; they already be kicking in.

Closing the front door, Will shivers as heat crackles down his spine. The air is thick with Margot's musk; it hangs like smoke in her wake, clogging his mind and dulling his thoughts, whilst somehow sharpening his other senses.

He turns slowly, his mouth watering at the taste of her, the scent settling like sugar on his tongue, coating his glands and trickling down to fill his belly with fire…

She smells *divine*.

Last night's sex with Hannibal comes, unbidden, to his mind, and Will's cock twitches at the memory. A blissfully domestic evening with the dogs at the Baltimore townhouse, succulent steak and a rich caramel dessert, followed by slow lovemaking on the fur rug before crackling flames in Hannibal's bedroom…

An interval, both of them drunk on pheromones, where Will had traded a holiday in Florida for a new dress shirt and a lesson on the Theremin, which resulted in the same screeching as nails on a chalkboard.

'Sounds like I'm killing it!' he'd protested, gesturing like an idiot in mid-air, the sleeves of his new shirt pushed up to his elbows.

And Hannibal, pressed up against his back, his long legs to either side of him, had laughed, the sound of it rumbling between their bodies.

'You are killing it,' he'd agreed, his hot lips caressing the shell of Will's ear, making him squirm. 'Don't kill it.' A pause, then, 'A Theremin is an instrument that can create exquisite music, without *ever* needing to be touched. *But*...'

He'd rested his chin on Will's shoulder and run a hand down his arm to take control, guiding him in the undulating gesture needed to get the right note, sliding the fingers of his other hand beneath the sheet around their hips, *just* teasing the tip of his growing erection.

'It requires the rare gift of perfect pitch to play properly.'

The note had changed, becoming softer, sweeter, and Will had leant back against Hannibal's chest, trying to focus on the instrument but swiftly losing concentration because of his aching cock.

'Feel the vibration move through you,' Hannibal had purred, abandoning his guiding attempt and pressing his palm against Will's chest. 'Feel it here.' And then lower, pulling him back against an answering hardness. 'And *here*.'

Watching Margot shed her coat and toss it over the back of his couch, Will finds his heart stuttering and failing to find a steady rhythm. He remembers how his breath had caught last night, how his brain had melted under Hannibal's manipulation… He'd been in as much a

stupor then as he is now. His eyes had closed and he'd spread his legs wider, his crest swelling up against the collar of the shirt.

'S'like composing in thin air,' he'd murmured, no longer caring how stupid he must look. And Hannibal, being Hannibal, had *purred* his satisfaction at the effect so easily wrought on his Omega, and replied,

'Thin air is a musician's canvas.'

Your mind is my killer's canvas.

'Mind if I pour?'

Margot's voice drags him back to the present, and Will hums his consent as he moves with heavy limbs towards the armchairs. Beyond the rug, glaringly visible this time, is his bed. The sheets are fresh, the covers neat… It could have been made for this visit.

Will's head is swimming. He leans back against his dresser and takes a slow sip of the small whiskey Margot gives him. The spirit is rich and heavy, laced with honey and oak. It's *much* nicer than the stuff he gave her.

Margot moves closer to the bedroom area, the silk of her emerald shirt clinging to her back as beads of sweat trickle down her spine. Her gaze linger on the pillows; she can imagine her hair fanned out across the cotton, her burning body cooled by the draft leaking through the tarp stapled across the broken window.

'What happened to your window?' she asks, partly out of curiosity, partly to excuse her staring at the bed. She doesn't want Will to bolt.

'Er, a stag got lost in the storm,' Will replies, his lips tightening into a humorless smile at the half-truth. He *had* seen a stag, after all… 'Came through there.'

Margot raises an eyebrow over her shoulder, clearly skeptical, and Will shrugs.

'Got a few scratches getting him out,' he adds. At that, Margot smiles, and looks over towards the bed again.

'Are you scarred?'

They both know she isn't just talking about the stag anymore, and Will's voice, when he replies, is muted.

'Probably more than I know.'

You bonded me, and then you broke open my mind... His words to Hannibal; the first of an endless dance of betrayal and forgiveness.

Margot takes another sip of whiskey, soothing her nerves, and then turns to the other Omega. She moves slowly, deliberately, and feels the pulse between her legs as the Heat stimulants take full effect.

‘I’ll show you mine if you show me yours,’ she purrs, knowing how gold her eyes must look, how pink her cheeks and full her lips. She can smell the change in her scent; like candied apples on a bonfire. And Will is interested; she can smell that, too. His scent has sharpened, his pulse quickening, and his eyes drift ever closer to the plunging neckline of her blouse.

The offer is implicit. Margot wants to have sex with him… She’s nervous; mingled with the mouthwatering caramel seeping from her pores is a hint of salt, but that only adds to the appeal. Will is finding it more and more difficult to concentrate, but something tugs at him, a faint whisper in the dark recesses of his mind.

‘I don’t have the right *parts* for your *proclivities*, Margot.’

The younger Omega doesn’t answer. She just sets her whiskey glass aside and closes the final gap between them, her fingers rising to pluck at the buttons of her blouse.

‘The Theremin can produce sounds designed to trigger arousal and compliance in Omegas,’ Hannibal had told him, even as he guided Will’s hands to play exactly the right notes to leave him a bundle of over-stimulated nerves in his arms.

Will remembers mumbling something about it being a very psychological instrument, fast slipping into the dark current rising like a wave of shadow inside him.

This is what Heat felt like.

Margot is so close to him now; Will can taste the whiskey on her breath and see the ripple of heat in the air between them. And, through it all, Hannibal’s voice in his ear, sliding poisonous words deep into his subconscious, just like before.

‘I work with people the same way. Never touching… But guiding them from dissonance toward composition.’

It’s our song, Will. Yours and mine. It’s what we’ve been doing from the start.

Will halts Margot, catching her hand between their chests and holding it. She’s so small; her fingers are fragile, easily broken, and he can feel the fluttering of her pulse against his thumb.

She’s incredibly pretty. She stares at him, the gold of her eyes brighter than his. Unbonded. Untasted…

People are not instruments. I won’t be played, anymore.

Will puts his glass on the dresser and takes hold of Margot’s buttons, feeling clumsy now that he’s committed. Margot is more controlled when she lifts her own arms within the cage of his, opening his plaid shirt to expose his chest and abdomen, grazing the ridged scar of Hannibal's bite surrounding Jack’s bullet wound as she pushes it down over his left shoulder.

Hannibal had been tender with him, last night; the notes of the Theremin had rendered him sweet and pliant, and the Alpha had mapped every inch of Will’s body with his lips before plunging deep inside him and filling him to the core…

Will pushes at the silk of Margot's blouse and she turns with it, dipping her head to reveal the smooth, unmarked nape of her neck. It flushes red, enticing even to Will, and he can't help but list towards it before his sharp eyes spot the unmistakable scars of a belt. As he pauses, taking stock of Margot's back, he realizes she is covered in marks; burns, cuts… Even bites.

'Who *did* this to you?' he growls, his shadow rearing up inside him, demanding revenge. But Margot just sighs and cups her bare breasts as the blouse shivers to the floor.

'My brother,' she says, wearily. Turning back to him, she looks up at Will from beneath lowered lashes, reassured by look of hunger on his face. 'Who shot you?'

Will cups her cheek, sliding his fingers through her hair and massaging her scalp. If he can offer her some small comfort, here, then he'll do whatever he can.

'A friend,' he whispers, and silences any further questions by kissing her.

It's nothing like kissing Hannibal, or Alana. Margot is tiny in his arms, and her lipstick tastes like cherries. Hannibal's jaw is always rough with stubble, but Margot's skin is soft. She folds herself into his body, crushing her small breasts to his chest and sending a zing of arousal through him at the half-forgotten sensation of it.

It's been years since he's slept with a woman. Greedy hands note all the differences between their bodies; Margot's nipples are wide and firm, her waist dips in and her hips flare. The toned muscles of her ass clench up when he grabs her and hauls her to him, getting a knee between her legs to rub his crotch against hers.

'Bed,' she gasps, pushing at him, fumbling with the zipper of her pants and half-heartedly tugging at Will's belt. Will nods, swept up in the raging current of arousal, no longer caring that this doesn't make any sense.

He stumbles backwards, kicking off shoes and socks, yanking down his jeans and boxers as fast as possible. Margot toes off her shoes and pushes her pants down, earning a wide-eyed expression of surprise from Will when she isn't wearing panties beneath.

'You know what I came for,' Margot purrs, coming closer and tangling her hands in Will's curls. She pulls him in for another hungry kiss, lapping at his tongue with her own, stoking the fires back into a raging inferno and then shoving him down onto the bed.

Will lands with a huffing laugh, and the mattress squeaks beneath his weight. He props himself up on his elbows, grinning like an idiot as Margot crawls up between his legs.

'You're so beautiful,' he says, reaching for her hair again. He brushes it back from her face, staring up at her as she straddles his hips, quivering at the *heat* of her. He runs his hands up and down her back, ignoring the scars and concentrating on the rippling muscles beneath, the flare of her ribs and the notches of her spine, rocking up towards the thin line of air at her crotch and the inviting wetness brushing against the aching head of his erection.

Margot closes her eyes, sinking deeper into the drug-induced haze. Her bones are on fire; her muscles are melting and all she wants is an Alpha's touch. An Alpha's teeth…

She quivers as she rocks forward against Will's cock. It's wrong; it's *wrong*, but she can pretend it's a toy. She's used some really realistic knotting dildos in the past, and all she wants right now is to be filled and fucked and bitten and *pregnant*.

'In,' she whispers, reaching down and taking hold of him. She guides him back and up, rising onto her knees and then sinking down, taking him all the way to the root in one smooth motion.

Will's voice catches on a groan and he closes his eyes, balls tightening at the burning tightness of her. He's been the one receiving for so long that it's a shock, and he has a sudden fear that he's going to come in an embarrassingly short amount of time.

Margot releases her breath slowly, tilting her head up to stare, sightless, at the ceiling. Lava pours through her veins and all she wants to do is slam down onto Will's body again and again. She rolls her hips, moaning softly at the rub inside, wondering if the Heat stimulants will be enough to let her come. It doesn't really matter – she can get pregnant without her own orgasm – but it would be nice.

'C'm'here,' Will mumbles, pulling at her, encouraging her down for another kiss. The change in angle is good, and Margot meets his thrust with one of her own, taking control of the embrace before Will surges up and rolls her onto her back.

Rearing up, bracing himself on locked arms, Will rides the waves of black bliss crashing through him. He's here with Margot, but he can sense Hannibal with him, too; he can feel his Alpha's hands on his back, in his hair, his Alpha's teeth on his neck and his knot in his body. When he looks down, he can see his mate, see his sandy hair and gleaming eyes, see his cruel lips and sharp cheekbones, the dull flush of color darkening already golden skin…

'Stay with me,' Hannibal whispers, and Will can't stop the keening whine from escaping his lips. He kisses Margot, kisses Hannibal, silencing himself, losing himself to the rhythm of sex. The in and out, the roll and pause… The friction and wet heat and clenching muscles and sweaty skin all mingling together into a symphony of pleasure…

He comes hard, spilling himself inside Margot even as she bears down around him, her body aching for a knot.

'Again,' Margot gasps, grabbing for him when he tries to pull away, rolling with him when he moves and then scrambling up to turn her back on him, getting into the classic mating position on her hands and knees. 'Fuck me again.'

'I…' Will shakes his head, dizzy with the smell of caramel and sex and sweat and fiery *lust* coating their skin. He falls at Margot, bruising her hips as he yanks her back against him, still rigid with the slick coating him. He's trying to think, there's a question nagging him, a suspicion, but it's swiftly forgotten when Margot kneels up and tugs his hands to her breasts. He nods, or tries to nod, and then he's sliding back inside her, muffling his groans by mouthing at her nape.

Margot shudders, clawing at Will's thighs as pleasure radiates down her spine. She hadn't expected it to feel so good, but the press of lips, the scrape of teeth and the rasp of Will's

tongue over her neck is too much, and she brings herself to a juddering orgasm as the other Omega continues to suck a bruise into her creamy skin.

Hannibal…

Will's mind comes untethered, floating through dark corridors until he's back in his Alpha's bedroom, the fire crackling and sheets tangled around their legs. Hannibal is on him, in him, he's *everywhere*, and Will throws his head back in utter surrender.

'We could take her together,' Hannibal whispers, nibbling kisses along Will's jaw, resting his teeth over the thundering pulse. 'You fuck Alana. I fuck you… Then you wouldn't feel so jealous.'

'M'not jealous,' Will mumbles, and he turns Margot's face around so he can kiss her. It's messy; they're both breathing hard, and the air quickly grows damp between them, but it silences Hannibal's insidious suggestion, at least.

As he fucks into Margot, the ghost of his mate fucks into him, reminding him of their bond, their connection… Imaginary claws rake his skin and he cries out, bucking down away from the pain, arching up into the sensation, seeking the pleasure of it…

And, through it all, in the master bedroom of their Mind Palace, the demon wendigo watches.

You're mine, Will.

Hannibal's hunger is insatiable, even in sex. When it comes to Will, he wants it all. He wants to consume him, utterly, and have him live on, forever, inside him.

You've tainted me. Am I tainting Margot?

The wendigo fucks into him, ripping through reality and mounting him with a terrifying insistence. It isn't brutal, but the inevitability of it is somehow worse than being torn apart. It's *good*; too good to resist. It seeps into him, fills every fiber of his being. Will can hear himself panting, growling with effort, and skin slaps skin as he chases white fire into his second, final climax.

The pleasure hits him hard and all at once. Will squeezes his eyes shut, his ears ringing. He can feel his muscles lock tight, his hips pressed flush to Margot's. He's as deep inside her as he can go, filling her with potent seed even as she spasms around him, drawn into the spiral by the scent of his release.

And then it's over. His head hits the pillow and all the strength leaves his body. He curls onto his side, reaching for the Alpha that isn't there, even as Margot hurries to get dressed. The stimulants are already wearing off, which, hopefully, means they've done their job.

'You can stay,' Will says quietly, making her pause as she buttons her blouse.

Margot smiles at him over her shoulder, but there's a sad finality to the expression, and Will just nods, and watches her leave.

Lying there in the dark, with only the breathing of the dogs and the trickle of water through the pipes to keep him company, Will can't help but miss Hannibal. He rolls over, side to side, and even fetches a dozen throws and more of the throw pillows the Alpha snuck into the house, making himself a luxurious nest.

It makes no difference. Two hours later, he's as resolutely awake as ever, and the residue of sex on his skin is making him itch.

'Fuck it.'

He kicks the covers off, dislodging Jack-Dog and Bruce in the process, and stomps into the bathroom. Perhaps a shower will make him feel better.

The steaming water and a liberal coating of the cedarwood and musk-scented bodywash does help alleviate the feeling of being dirty, of being wrong, but it does nothing for the hollow ache in his chest, and Will has already reached for his cell and dialed Hannibal before he realizes what he's doing. He sinks onto the bed, naked and dripping, as he listens to it ring. Three… Four… It's about to switch to voicemail when the line clicks.

'Hello, Will.'

The Alpha's voice is muffled; Will has obviously woken him from sleep. Guilt stabs at him, but there's already warmth where ice was coating his lungs.

'I can't sleep,' he says, glancing over at the blue numbers of his clock. 2:21am.

There's a rustle of sheets and a stifled yawn on the other end. When Hannibal speaks again, he sounds more clear-headed.

'Would you like me to come over?'

Glancing over his shoulder, taking note of the sex-stained and rumpled bedding, Will's gut twists.

'No,' he replies, his lips thinning. 'I'll come to you.'

'Is everything alright?' Hannibal asks, and there's a note in his voice that could be mistaken for genuine concern.

If Will didn't know him better.

'I was dreaming about last night,' he lies, scrubbing at the back of his head to dry off his curls, flinging water droplets everywhere. 'It turned into a nightmare.'

'I did feel something,' Hannibal admits, and Will nods to himself. So, he *was* sensing Hannibal through their bond, even as he was fucking someone else. Well, he's just giving the Alpha a taste of his own medicine. And besides, Hannibal doesn't need to know *who* he had sex with. He won't ask, of course; he'll want Will to confess on his own terms, but Will has no intention of saying that it was anything more than a wet dream, let alone that it was a fellow patient.

‘I’ll be there soon,’ he says, and ends the call.

He dries himself off and dresses in jeans and a t-shirt, layering up with a soft cotton shirt and boots. Snapping his fingers, he rouses the dogs and ushers them towards the front door, carrying Underbite when the little Shihtzu refuses to leave her bed.

‘Come on, everybody,’ he says, checking the lock and then stomping through the snow to the car, the world leeched of color by the full moon overhead. ‘Let’s go back to Baltimore.’

***

Up at Georgetown University, Dr. Alana Bloom has a spring in her step as she leaves her classes for the day. She’s received a dinner invitation from Hannibal, hand-written on heavy parchment in his flowing script, requesting the pleasure of her company on Saturday at eight o’clock. Not only is the old-fashioned pomp and ritual of it all a rare treat, but dinner with Hannibal usually means sex, and she’s *missed* being with him.

Distracted as she is, she doesn’t notice the red-haired Alpha step up beside her until it’s too late.

‘I’ve always *admired* teachers,’ Freddie Lounds says, keen nose picking up the scent of arousal on the Beta woman, sharp eyes noting the tell-tale calligraphy of Dr Hannibal Lecter on the dinner invitation poking up from the top of her briefcase. So, there *is* something going on between them. She had wondered. ‘Molding impressionable young minds…’ She sighs. ‘But, you can only learn so much and live.’

What will Hannibal Lecter do to you when you learn the truth about him? What might Will Graham do?

‘No-one likes a know-it-all, Freddie,’ Alana replies, injecting as much contempt into her voice as she can manage.

Freddie doesn’t let Alana’s clear dislike of her put her off. She is nothing if not tenacious.

‘Hannibal Lecter taught *you* when you were an impressionable young mind,’ she says, slanting another sideways glance at Alana.

The Beta frowns, and picks up her pace, hoping to shake the journalist before she reaches her car.

‘Your book’s about Will Graham; it’s not *about* me.’

‘Were you sleeping with Hannibal Lecter when you were his *student*, or is that a recent development?’ Freddie asks, smirking at the way Alana’s lips thin in an obvious tell. ‘Oh, you *are* sleeping with him… I was just guessing.’ She pushes a curl back behind her ear. ‘Figured you had to be sleeping with *one* of them… Maybe that’s why you can’t see it.’

Alana rounds on her, her face pinched with fury, eyes flashing in the winter sun.

‘See *what?’* she snarls, barely resisting the urge to add several expletives to the question.

Freddie's expression softens, but in the same way one might look at the naïve wife of pedophile.

'That Will Graham was *right* about Hannibal Lecter,' she replies. A pause and then, 'And *I* was right about Will Graham.'

Alana's mind spins and she tosses her head.

'I'm not having *this* or any *other* conversation with you, Freddie.'

She starts walking again, but Freddie is nothing if not persistent, and keeps step just behind.

'Hannibal Lecter had four patients *die* whilst under his care,' she says, driving the words deep into Alana's mind. 'Three former patients die *after* his care, and *then* there's Will Graham… All that *fuss* about Dr Lecter… Will even tried to *kill* him, just to escape their bond and now they're, what? Happily mated? Back in therapy together, and *another* former patient has died.'

Alana, having reached her car, round on Freddie again, glaring down at the smaller woman.

'Will understands that Hannibal Lecter can *help* him,' she replies. 'He understands that he needs a mate, even if he doesn't *want* one.'

Freddie tilts her head, the red rings around her eyes flashing bright.

'Maybe what Will *understands* is that if you can't *beat* Hannibal Lecter… join him.' She shrugs. 'It's only natural, after all. He *is* bonded to him.'

The reminder of their mated status is clearly unsettling for Alana; perhaps she'll listen more closely if she's already reconsidering the fact that her affair with Hannibal must, inevitably, lose out to his relationship with Will.

Alana chokes back a snarl, wrenches open the door of her car and gets in, slamming it shut in Freddie's face.

Freddie watches her leave, smiling at a job well done.

Now, if she can just convince Jack Crawford…

***

After his final patient of the afternoon, Hannibal drives out to the Verger estate, curious as to the nature of the invitation from Margot's twin brother and legal guardian, Mason.

He follows the service road back towards the stables, as instructed, and parks near an imposing building that resembles the infamous Tower of London more than any country house.

A Sardinian Alpha waits by the entrance, his fedora pulled low and shoulders hunched inside his woolen coat. He nods when Hannibal meets his eye and leads the way inside, releasing a

waft of straw, pig shit and the unmistakable smell of blood.

My, my, Mason… What have you been up to in here?

Hannibal eyes the metal corridors bordering his passageway with mild curiosity; he has an idea of Mason's purpose for this barn already, but he'd like to have it confirmed. The Sard drops back when they reach a staircase and Hannibal ascends alone, one leather-gloved hand on the railing for support, a spring in his step as he prepares to meet Margot's abuser.

Mason Verger is a small, pudgy Beta. Dressed in an expensive suit and black overcoat, he has no doubt styled himself to reek of wealth and, by extension, power. But Hannibal has money, and a higher status both from breeding and caste, and he is *not* impressed. He notes the hair, described by Margot as "styled to look mad", this time combed down in an attempt to appear civil.

The Verger heir is little more than the result of bad genetics and an over-indulgent father. Mason is trying too hard, and if he hadn't already been blessed with millions of dollars, he would be just another sheep living a nobody's life in the middle of some city.

'Dr Lecter.' Mason turns at the sound of Hannibal's step, and nods briskly, lifting his head and squaring his jaw. 'Mason Verger.'

They shake, Hannibal holding back and allowing Mason to squeeze just a little tighter than is polite when greeting an Alpha.

'So very nice to meet you,' Mason says, his blue eyes flashing behind wire-rimmed glasses. '*Thank you* for accepting my invitation.'

'I'm prone to old-world politeness,' Hannibal replies, the curl of his lips doing nothing to warm his eyes. 'Would have seemed rude to say "no".'

Mason nods, and smirks with the same impetuous quality of a spoilt toddler.

'Since I'm *paying* for Margot's therapy, I thought I should at the very least meet her psychiatrist.' He rakes his blue eyes up and down Hannibal, taking note of his height, his width and the fine bone structure of his face. His flabby lips thin in displeasure at what he finds.

'I enjoy putting a face to the name,' Hannibal replies, smiling at the idea of what *else* he could do with Mason's face.

He is distracted, however, by the sound of pigs snorting and squealing, and looks across to the gilded mirror suspended over the open top of the metal maze below their platform. The creatures are large; lean and roped with muscle, their backs covered by a layer of coarse brown hair and wicked tusks rising from their jaws.

'Your swine are exceptional,' he adds, nodding his appreciation. His father raised horses, but they had a few pigs at the estate when he was a boy, and he can appreciate the anatomy of a well-bred animal. 'Never seen pigs like these.'

Mason narrows his eyes at him, and approaches the railing of the platform. Hannibal's unshakeable confidence, even in the face of his *Il Maiale Della Morte* herd is annoying. He isn't accustomed to people dismissing him, and he doesn't like it.

'They're a special breed,' he replies. 'The product of many years, many litters.'

Hannibal leans further over, acting for all the world as though he is genuinely interested.

'What's your ground note?' he asks, referring to the genetic baseline of the creatures before him.

Mason considers him with surprise, pleased that the good doctor knows what he's talking about with regards to breeding.

'We started with Giant Forest Pigs,' he says, smiling down at his pets. 'Six teats. Thirty-eight chromosomes… A resourceful feeder and an *opportunistic* omnivore.'

'Just like man,' Hannibal says, a dark smile on his lips.

Mason smirks at him.

'You must know *pigs* as well as you know people,' he suggests, and Hannibal turns to him, the smile growing wider.

'I do know pigs,' he agrees.

Most of mankind is a pig… Nothing but sounders waiting for my inspiration.

'Papa would have *loved* you,' Mason says, nodding to himself. He holds out his hands, gesticulating as he continues, 'He could feel the face of a hog and tell by the bone structure its genetic makeup.' He pauses, the odd light back in his eyes. 'Breeding was, er, very *important* to my father… Margot really pissed him off with her, er… "button-stitching" and Omegan nonsense.' He shakes his head. 'Poor breeding, there.'

Hannibal considers him in chilling silence, smug in the knowledge that Margot's plans to conceive and carry an heir will, inevitably, lead to this maggot's death. Perhaps she'll even allow him to watch her kill him.

'Do you have an Omega, Dr Lecter?' Mason's voice is sharp; warning him that he is not to be fucked with.

'I do,' Hannibal replies, the coolness of his tone a warning of his own.

Mason hums.

'Then you *understand* my need to protect Margot,' he says. 'Mostly from *herself*. I mean, Omegas are dependent anyway, but she's pathological.' At Hannibal's continuing lack of response, he tries for a grimacing smile. 'I'm sure she's told you *horrible* things that I've done.'

‘I can’t tell you what Margot’s confessed to me,’ Hannibal replies, the only reprieve from his stillness is a faint smile as he adds, ‘Fortunately for you, I can’t tell anyone.’

I know you, Mason Verger. I know everything about you.

Mason freezes and there’s a moment where Hannibal isn’t entirely sure what the other man will do. The thrill is exhilarating but short-lived; unlike Will, Mason has neither the courage nor the ingenuity to actually pose a threat. The Beta simply coughs out a laugh and holds his hands up in mock surrender.

‘You got me!’ he chuckles, no longer pretending to be ashamed or worried about the doctor’s opinion of him. Margot is *his* property, after all; he can do with her what he sees fit.

Hannibal circles closer, weighing his options with Mason. He sees the chance for a little fun.

‘Even the worst of us needs someone to talk to, Mason,’ he says, meeting Mason’s eyes directly. ‘Have you ever considered therapy for yourself?’

Mason pauses, wrinkling his nose, and then shrugs.

‘Maybe I should,’ he admits. When Hannibal says nothing further, he fidgets nervously and gestures off to the side, to the sour-faced Sardinian Alpha who had crept up the stairs to join them, unnoticed. The false confidence in his voice is clear evidence of his struggle to regain control of the situation. ‘Can I have Carlo slaughter you a hog?’

Hannibal ignores the other Alpha’s steady gaze on his neck and looks over at the gilded mirror, instead; watching the pigs milling around the shredded remains of meat and a woman’s Omegan-cut suit.

‘A token of appreciation,’ Mason continues, ‘for all that you *do* for Margot.’

His tone makes Hannibal wonder how many “therapists” have forced themselves on the Omega, in an attempt to convert and “fix” her homosexuality.

Hannibal smiles at Mason. Well, he did offer… Perhaps there will be some way to manipulate Carlo into accidentally killing his boss… Then it really would be the slaughtering of a hog.

‘Please,’ he agrees. ‘But I must insist on selecting my own pig.’ His eyes flash crimson and he’s satisfied to smell a hint of salty fear in Mason’s scent as he adds, ‘I always do.’

***

Saturday morning is spent in bed having slow, lazy sex followed by breakfast. Will stretches out on the rumpled covers, dressed in nothing but a sheet and a collar of suck marks around his throat, reading the news on his cell phone and petting Winston, who is lying along his side with his head on his belly.

‘I’ve invited Alana over for dinner this evening,’ Hannibal says, breaking the companionable silence between them. He doesn’t look up from his tablet, no doubt catching up on Freddie

Lounds's latest articles on TattleCrime.com, and Will shoots him a scowl before returning to his own screen.

'Is that your polite way of telling me to go back to Wolf Trap so you two can fuck?' he asks, doing nothing to hide the waspish tone in his voice.

Hannibal doesn't react; he was expecting such a reaction from his mate. The very idea of having sex with Alana now turns his stomach.

'Not at all,' he replies calmly, still overtly engrossed in his tablet. 'Actually, I was hoping you would join us. I intend to tell her the happy news about our Pair Bond.'

'Doubt she'll find it happy,' Will mutters, putting his phone down and focusing his attention on Winston. 'So, is that it, then? You're done with her?'

'Yes,' Hannibal replies, turning his head at the exact moment that Will looks at him. They stare into each other's eyes, crimson-ringed brown meeting gold-edged blue, and Will feels a tug in his chest, like the swell of a wave before it breaks against the shore.

'I'll join you,' he says hoarsely, and Hannibal leans over to steal a kiss. Sensing it deepen, Will nudges Winston and the collie-cross jumps down, giving them privacy. Hannibal puts his iPad on the side table and then combs his fingers through Will's hair, guiding him closer and then down to lie beneath him as he crawls on top. The sheet snags and is tugged away, allowing skin to slide against skin as they nestle together, Hannibal between Will's legs, a growing erection nudging at his answering hardness as they rock slowly, savoring the sweet tingle.

'You're everything I've dreamed of,' Hannibal whispers, gazing down into Will's face, drinking in and etching the details of his beloved into the frescoes of his memory palace. The soft lips, flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes… Tumbling brown curls, creamy skin marked with scars; each a story of their journey towards each other. To this moment, and everything that follows.

'And you're the nightmare that followed me into waking,' Will replies, mirroring Hannibal's gesture and stroking his hair before cupping the side of his face, keeping eye contact as he bends his knees further and invites Hannibal to push back inside his body.

Hannibal's breath catches at the heat of his Omega's slick. He takes hold of himself and eases in, inch by careful inch until he is fully sheathed and gripped tight by pulsing muscles. Will arches, hissing out a groan at how *good* it feels to be connected again, nerves firing as Hannibal's cock rubs against his tender prostate.

'What's for dinner, Dr Lecter?' he asks, sucking his stomach up to grip Hannibal tighter inside him, rolling his hips in time to Hannibal's thrust and matching him with an eye-watering jolt of pleasure. He digs his nails into Hannibal's shoulders, cutting bloody half-moons into the rounds of his muscle, and Hannibal shivers with joy at the mix of sensations. He braces himself over his mate, elbows locked but curving down over him. Possessive and protective.

‘Pig,’ he murmurs, and snaps his pelvis, drawing a delicious cry from Will. The walls of his memory palace glow as they both abandon words in favor of chasing the white fire building inside them, their bodies already over-sensitive from their earlier lovemaking. The room fills with the sound of their heavy breathing, the rhythmic creak of the bed and the smack of wet kisses snatched between gasps of air.

Will comes first, pleasure building higher and higher until it reaches a crescendo and tips over. He arches again, every muscle locking tight, and spills his himself over both their chests, his head thrown back in ecstasy, eyes wide and sightless as he rides the high.

The sight and smell of him brings Hannibal to his own peak, and, for just a moment, he is with Will in the cherub-painted room, frothy white curtains billowing in the breeze that carries with it the sound of a child splashing in a copper tub outside in the sunny kitchen garden.

He stares down at his mate, shuddering as his knot swells and seals them together. Will is radiant, basking in his own orgasm, utterly open and vulnerable to him. There is no longer any fear or embarrassment; Will has come fully into his own, and it is glorious.

They stay where they are for a while; Hannibal half-draped over Will’s sticky body, Will’s knee crooked to hold the Alpha close, both idly toying with each other’s hair and chests. They are in no rush; Hannibal has already begun preparing the hog that Mason gifted to him, and the only thing Will needs to do today is walk the dogs.

‘What time is Alana due?’ he asks, ignoring the pang of disappointment when Hannibal’s knot subsides and he slips out of him.

‘I’ve requested her company at eight,’ Hannibal replies. He gets up and heads to the bathroom. ‘I’m having a shower; would you care to join me?’

‘I’ll be there in a minute,’ Will replies, tugging at the sheet to cover his nakedness again and then inviting the pack up onto the bed with him. He grins at Hannibal’s pained expression but misses the way it softens as he curls around the smaller dogs, fussing them like he would his own children.

Soon, my love, Hannibal thinks. *And we can take them with us, across the world.*

***

Alana arrives at quarter to eight, a bottle of red wine in hand and a spring in her step. It promptly falters, however, when she walks into the dining room to see Will already sat at the table, and the dogs milling around. As lovely as it is to see them again, their presence indicates that the Omega has been here for a while, or intends to stay the night. Neither of which bodes well for her.

‘Hello, Alana,’ Will says, offering her a nod and a polite smile. There is a sadness to his eyes; he clearly misses her as a friend, but too much has happened between them to ever reclaim what they have lost.

‘Are we expecting anyone else?’ Alana asks, looking to Hannibal as he returns from hanging up her coat and scarf.

‘Just us,’ the Alpha replies, smiling genially as he takes the bottle from her hands and disappears into the kitchen.

Alana sighs and sits down across from Will, resigning herself to an uncomfortable evening and a night alone. Perhaps Will is insisting on Hannibal remaining faithful to him. It seems a pity, when there’s been so much bad blood between them.

Hannibal returns to pour her a glass of water and some of the wine he’s paired with their meal; Will has already drunk most of his, Alana can see; she wonders how many units he’s ingested to cope with this evening.

‘Thank you so much for joining us,’ Hannibal murmurs, and Alana doesn’t miss the warning frown that Will shoots him. Hannibal is being nothing but polite, but there is a distance between them now; she can feel the walls separating them, just as they did before, when Hannibal kept their relationship strictly friendly.

‘Of course.’ She gives him a warm smile, trying to ease some of the tension in the room, and Hannibal gives her shoulder a small squeeze before returning to the kitchen, snapping his fingers for the dogs to follow. They will stay in the pantry whilst they eat, playing with their new toys and sleeping in the plush beds he bought for them the other day.

When the Alpha has left the room, Alana turns to Will.

‘You look well.’

‘Is that a statement or a question?’ Will replies, reaching for his wine and taking a tiny sip. He only has a taste, and it’s taking all his effort not to knock it back as a safety net for the bristling anger radiating from Alana. She has been insulted by his presence; he is a reminder that she is the one trespassing here. She is the one in the wrong; disrespecting a mating bond by sleeping with Hannibal.

‘Both,’ Alana says, narrowing her eyes at him. Will is different; colder, sharper… more confident than before.

More like Hannibal.

It’s not a good look on him.

‘I’m fine,’ Will says shortly, and Alana bites her cheek. She takes a drink of wine and only breathes a sigh of relief when Hannibal returns with their starters.

‘Asparagus, pheasant egg and rapeseed mayonnaise,’ he announces, placing the small plates before them. Alana sniffs and her mouth waters at the aroma rising on the steam. She picks up her knife and fork, poking at the crumbed egg and grinning when yolk spills from the middle. Perfectly cooked, as always.

‘This looks wonderful,’ she says warmly; a stark contrast to Will’s quizzical frown.

‘What happened to the camembert and fig tart?’ the Omega asks, slower to pick up his cutlery.

Hannibal unbuttons his suit jacket and sits at the head of the table, glancing towards Alana as he considers his response.

‘I wanted something lighter,’ he replies, unfolding his napkin and placing it over his lap to protect the silk-wool blend of his trousers.

In truth, he had checked and realized that Will’s pregnancy prohibited him from eating several types of cheeses, as well as pan-fried scallops and rare meat. The starter had had to change.

‘Thought it *was* light,’ Will mutters, spearing an asparagus and biting into the end. Alana watches the exchange with a growing frown, hoping Will isn’t about to start an argument with Hannibal; it’s clear that he is going out of his way to care for his mate, and Will doesn’t seem the least bit appreciative of his effort.

‘How’s the book going?’ she asks, snatching his attention back to herself to give the Alpha a reprieve.

Will shrugs.

‘Alright.’ He chews the rest of his asparagus before continuing, ‘It’s Freddie’s baby, not mine. I just answer the questions she asks.’

‘Speaking of questions,’ Alana says, scooping up a small amount of mayonnaise onto another bite of egg. ‘What’s the latest on you two?’ She puts the food into her mouth and raises her eyebrows at them as she chews.

Hannibal and Will exchange looks. Will gestures for the Alpha to reply and Hannibal smiles at Alana.

‘Will and I are mated,’ he says, to which Will rolls his eyes and Alana has to force herself to swallow past the sudden tightness in her throat. Hannibal refuses to notice either reaction. ‘For all our differences, all our… *disagreements*,’ he continues, delicately skirting the subject of Will’s attempted murder, ‘we belong together.’

‘Are you moving in together?’ Alana asks, reaching for her wine to wash away the bitter taste of regret in her mouth.

Again, Hannibal and Will exchange looks. Will shrugs and shakes his head, speaking around a mouthful of egg yolk.

‘We haven’t decided.’

‘There’s no rush,’ Hannibal adds, something dark and coy glinting in his obsidian eyes. Alana feels a tingle of fear run up her spine, and glances down to see if her hands are shaking.

Only slightly.

‘It’s just a little unnerving,’ she says, responding to Hannibal’s unasked question. ‘Seeing you two together again, after so much has happened.’

‘Our experiences shape us,’ Hannibal replies, cutting asparagus to layer with egg and sauce. ‘I’ve changed. So has Will.’

You changed me.

Will abandons the remains of his starter for a sip of his wine, and Alana lets the subject rest.

Silence falls between them when Hannibal takes their plates and leaves to fetch the main course from the kitchen. Will lets it fester, preferring to fiddle with his napkin than put the Beta at ease.

Eventually, after what feels like an age, Hannibal returns. He is dramatic as ever; wheeling in a whole pig on a serving trolley, displayed with grapes, apples and a variety of pork products, all of which have clearly been handmade from the pig itself. There are links of sausages, bacon medallions and chops to last for weeks.

‘Brined and roasted whole suckling pig,’ Hannibal announces, stopping the trolley beside Alana. He takes the silver serving spoons from the hollowed center of the animal and lifts out a serving of rice with pork strips mixed into it. ‘A gift from a friend.’

Alana grins, impressed and flattered by the theatrics. When she notices Will’s sour expression, her smile falters and she has to concentrate on Hannibal again. She wishes the Omega wasn’t here; if Hannibal is back together with him then fine, but it’s unfeasible to think Will can be civil with her after she slept with his mate.

Guilt flares, uncomfortably hot and bright, in her chest, and she can’t help but wonder why Hannibal has invited them both here at the same time. Surely he knows how painful it must be?

When Will speaks, his voice is muted and sullen. He watches Hannibal serve, accusation etched into every line of his face.

‘A friend of *yours*. Not a friend of the pig’s.’

We no longer have the same friends, Hannibal. I’m the pig, and you’ve altered me into something new. Something different.

‘There are those who raise livestock and have a genuine affection for them,’ Hannibal replies, wheeling the trolley around to his Omega. ‘The farmer who hand-rears lambs loves them, and sends them to slaughter.’

He places another portion of pork and rice onto Will’s plate, everything unspoken screaming in the space between them.

He has all but raised Will – the killer that he is has been nurtured by him, taught… *reared*… Will he slaughter him, too?

Will you eat me, when you're done with me? Will wonders, staring at Hannibal's hands.

'They love and kill what they love,' Alana says, unnervingly accurate in her comment. Hannibal keeps his gaze averted, ostensibly to collect his own serving, but he can't help but add a quiet,

'And eat what they love.' He sniffs and shakes off the melancholy, briskly placing a perfect scoop of food onto his own plate next to the bitter orange and pomegranate jus. 'It's a paradox.'

Will looks over at Alana, who sweeps accusing blue eyes from one man to the other.

'Freddie Lounds thinks the two of you are a paradox,' she says, tapping her knife with her forefinger. Hannibal turns, curious, as she adds, 'She sees something no-one else sees.'

'What's that?' Will asks, reaching for his cutlery.

Alana's lips twist and she picks up her own fork.

'That neither of you are the killer she's writing about,' she replies, glancing at Hannibal before saying, 'But together you might be.'

Hannibal focuses on scooping rice, pork and jus onto his fork as he says,

'Freddie Lounds must consider you a bland interview subject, Will, if she's already resorted to fiction.' He grins at his Omega, but Will doesn't smile back. He just chews his food and watches the way Alana tracks their interactions.

'She won't be fenced in by something as *malleable* at the truth,' Alana says. She shrugs. 'Freddie has no boundaries.'

'Someone with no boundaries is a psychopath,' Will says. He smirks. 'Or a journalist.'

Alana narrows her eyes, daring to take a risk now that they are settled deeper into the meal.

'Freddie isn't the only one without boundaries,' she says quietly, earning a curious glance from Hannibal. She gestures to the two of them with her fork. 'Your relationship doesn't seem to know many. Patient and therapist. Lover and enemy.'

Hannibal sighs.

'Crossing boundaries is different from violating them.'

Will and Alana both freeze mid-chew, Will from surprise and Alana from embarrassed fury. Twin spots of color appear high on her cheeks and she glares at the Alpha for so callously tossing out the reference to their affair. Yes, that had been a violation of boundaries. *That* had been a grave discourtesy to Will, but to *mention* it…?

Will looks from his mate to Alana and the Beta scrambles to recover her composure. She gives them both a tight-lipped smile.

‘Well, boundaries will always be subject to negotiation,’ she concedes. She fixes Will with an icy stare, refusing to play the role of villainess, just because he won. Will might be Omega, but Hannibal chose *her* for a reason. ‘It’s just hard to know where you are with each other.’

Will and Hannibal share another look, a thousand words in a single meeting of their eyes. Seeing them so united is like a kick to the stomach, and Alana’s cheeks burn when she realizes Will hasn’t forced Hannibal to do anything; the Alpha is *choosing* his mate over her, over anyone else, because he *wants* to.

‘We know where we are with each other,’ Will says, and then gives Alana the same cool smile she graced him with earlier. ‘Shouldn’t that be enough?’

Hannibal looks expectantly at them both, utterly pleased with himself at the smell of wild fire and smoke rising from Will – testament to the dark shadow fighting for dominance inside him, fueled by his anger at Alana’s presence – and Alana’s own gentler musk, bitter now with fury and resentment at being snubbed for a man she can’t possibly compete with.

There is no one but Will.

Alana rolls her eyes at him, seeking unity against the stroppy Omega, but Hannibal simply quirks his eyebrows and reaches for his wine.

‘Better the devil you know,’ he murmurs, grinning into the Pinot Noir.

Alana grabs her own glass and takes an angry gulp, the food forgotten.

‘Why did you invite me here?’ she demands, glaring at them both. ‘Are you trying to facilitate a reunion? Reconcile old wounds?’

‘Do you want a reconciliation?’ Hannibal asks, setting the crystal goblet down. ‘Do you want to apologize to Will?’

‘Apologize?’ Alana chokes on a laugh. ‘He tried to *kill* you, Hannibal!’

‘He believed I killed Beverly Katz,’ Hannibal replies, feeling Will’s gaze like a hot iron to his neck. He deliberately keeps his eyes fixed on Alana, searching for a shred of doubt; anything that will make her a threat.

Alana scoffs.

‘That doesn’t give him the right to send a *psychopath* after you!’ She rounds on the Omega. ‘You told me you were feeling unstable, and you bonded with Hannibal anyway. You weren’t over what happened with Coby and you went right back into the field. You were teaching about serial killers, and you convinced yourself that your *mate* was one of them.’

‘Evidently, I was wrong,’ Will says calmly, wetting his lips with another taste of wine. ‘Hannibal is no more a psychopath than I am.’

Hannibal's pleasure is a smug glow in the corner of his mind; the Alpha is in his element, winding his little puppets up and watching them go, curious to see how they react to a variety of stimuli. Guilt, it would seem, manifests itself as anger in Alana Bloom.

'So, what, all is forgiven?' Alana takes another large drink of wine and shakes her head at the Alpha to her right. 'This is a *mistake*, Hannibal. Will is playing you, and you're *letting* him.'

'Will is my mate,' Hannibal says, and even Will shivers at how *cold* his voice has become. It would seem the game is over. 'And I am his.'

He loosens his tie and releases the top two buttons of his shirt, pulling the material down to reveal the thin scar of his Alphan crest. Alana stills, wide blue eyes locked on the evidence of Will's claim over the other man, and then she very deliberately puts down her knife and fork.

'I have to go,' she mutters, dabbing at her lips with her napkin before rising from the table.

Will shoots Hannibal a furious glare.

'*That* was rude,' he growls, tossing his own napkin aside and hurrying after his former friend.

Alana is already in her coat and is tugging on leather gloves when he reaches the entrance hall.

'I shouldn't have come tonight,' the Beta mumbles, struggling to see through a haze of tears and praying they don't spill down her cheeks. 'This was a mistake.'

'Alana…' Will hesitates. Yes, this was a mistake… What is there to say…? She doesn't belong in their world.

He holds back, watching sadly as she wrenches open the front door and disappears into the night, embarrassed, insulted and ashamed of herself. He waits until the taillights of her car have disappeared down the street before locking the door behind him and returning to his Alpha.

Hannibal is happily eating his main course, spreading jus onto a chunk of pork and accompanying the aftertaste with a slow sip of wine.

'You didn't have to humiliate her like that,' Will says, returning to his seat.

Hannibal gives a delicate shrug.

'She needed to know.'

Will rolls his eyes.

'Yeah, well, it's not wise to piss off your biggest supporter.'

'I thought *you* were my biggest supporter,' Hannibal says, grinning at him.

Will shakes his head and drains the remnants of his wine.

‘No. I’m just the idiot who’s stuck with you for the rest of his life.’

***

The next day, after dropping Will and his dogs back to Wolf Trap, Hannibal takes a trip down the interstate to Freddie Lounds’s motel. He covers his outfit in a form-fitting, clear plastic suit and wears two layers of powder-free latex gloves to protect his hands. The door unlocks with childish ease, and he slips inside without detection.

Neither of you are the killer she’s writing about… But together you might be.

Miss Lounds is dangerous, and stumbling far too close to the truth. She has to go.

The room is clean, the bed made and all personal items tidied away, but Freddie’s distinctive perfume and her thick Alphan musk still lingers, as well as the smell of coffee and hair products. She was here this morning, and left not too long ago.

Hannibal sits down to wait. He crosses one leg over the other and steeples his fingers on his knee, sharp eyes locked on the door. This deep into the shadows, he is just out of eyeline. Freddie will be in the room with the door closed before she realizes she is not alone, and by then it will be too late.

He might prepare Miss Lounds’s tongue as *tonnato*, and serve it cold with a selection of Italian *antipasti*. Her heart will do well in a rich tomato and red wine ragù, whilst her liver, kidneys, intestines and limbs can be vacuum sealed and last for weeks.

To be killed by the Chesapeake Ripper would, indeed, be poetic. Perhaps he can even take her alive and have Will help with the kill…

He glances up at the sound of a car pulling up outside, adrenaline spiking but his heartrate holding steady as he waits for her to return. Another door opens further down the corridor and there is a burst of laughter. It is another guest.

The minutes crawl past, but Hannibal has cleared his schedule for this. He can wait here all day if he needs to.

Two hours later, he taps his forefingers together, the only sign of impatience.

Where is she?

***

It’s a little after 1pm when Freddie Lounds parks up on the driveway of Will Graham’s house in Wolf Trap, Virginia. Their appointment isn’t until 1.30, but she likes to be early when interviewing someone. Makes it easier to spot the truth when a person is caught off guard.

She cuts the engine of her SUV and climbs out. Will’s car is here, but there are no lights on despite the overcast day. From inside the house comes a cacophony of dog barks, muffled at first but growing louder the closer she gets to the porch. She raps on the screen door, frowning at the distinct lack of human presence.

It wouldn't be the first time an interview subject had stood her up.

The barking continues, unchecked, confirming her suspicions that Will is out. Freddie gives the door a tug, just in case, pretending that she isn't worried for the Omega, and then peers in through the window to her left.

Just dogs, an old couch and Will's house… Mismatched furniture, bare floorboards and shelves upon shelves of books.

He's not in there, but he hasn't driven, and he hasn't taken his dogs, which means he is avoiding her.

Fine. Freddie clomps down the porch side steps, her gaze fixed on the big barn tucked away behind the back yard. If Will is going to duck the interview, she is going to snoop around his property. God only *knows* what he's hiding in there…

The sturdy padlock is easy to pick, and she's inside in under a minute. It's drafty, and decidedly creepy; there are big sheets of plastic hanging from the rafters, distorting her view of something posed in the very center of the barn. Freddie feels her eyes prickle red and the fine hairs stand up on the back of her neck.

She approaches slowly, wary of boobytraps on the floor, and pulls back the veil to reveal the monster inside.

A giant beast skull and prehistoric bones, lashed together into a leather harness, strung up like a carcass from thick chains bolted into the ceiling.

What the…?

Without taking her eyes from the display, Freddie pulls a camera free of her handbag. She photographs it from every angle, working her way around until a chest freezer catches her attention.

Big enough for a body.

Randall Tier was an Alpha who wanted to be a beast. He killed his victims wearing a beast suit made of bones… A suit just like the one hanging in Will's barn. But he had been killed, and his own body dismembered, pieces screwed into the skeleton of a saber-cat in the Natural History Museum.

The Museum tableau hadn't included all of Randall's body parts…

Freddie tries to lift the lid but it's locked. Why lock a freezer unless you've something bad to hide?

She crouches before it and slides the lockpick into the mechanism, listening for the tell-tale clunk of the catch. Another easy one.

Mist rises, obscuring her vision. Freddie stands and gives it a moment to clear before reaching down into the box. There are dozens of cello-wrapped parcels, most of them trout.

There's a beef brisket, a pig's head and, nestled beneath the innocuous meat, something decidedly *not* fish.

Freddie's heart begins to race. Heat floods her body and she feels sweat dampen the brow of her beanie hat.

It's a jaw… It's a human jaw…

Revulsion makes her drop it; fear makes her hands shake. As she slams the lid shut on the clear evidence of Will's murder, her frayed nerves react too late to the realization that she is not alone.

The Omega is watching her from across the barn. He must have snuck in after she'd opened it, when she'd been too distracted by the *frozen jawbone* to notice.

Dressed in the smart coat, cashmere scarf and leather gloves from his Alpha, he looks every inch the killer she knows he is. His eyes blaze gold, and Freddie's throat closes around a whine. She takes a step back, her legs numb with shock, brain spinning in circles because it's true… It's really true… All this time…

Gun. She needs her gun.

She fumbles in her purse for the revolver, gasping when she finally gets it up. She wants to make a run for it; wants to sprint for her car and not stop driving until she's safe and she can report him… But Will has withdrawn into the shadows and she can't *see* him, she can't see anything because of the stupid plastic curtains, and he could be anywhere…

'There really is a very good explanation for all of this,' Will says quietly, hugging the edges of the barn as he comes closer to the terrified Alpha.

Freddie shakes her head, spreading the stink of fear with every labored breath, backing away even as she tries to follow his advancement with the gun.

'I don't wanna hear it.'

'Not just a little bit curious?' Will offers, slipping between two sheets of plastic and returning to her sightline.

Freddie's shaking doubles and her tongue sticks to the dry roof of her mouth.

'Get away from the door,' she croaks, involuntarily retreating once again.

Will dips his chin in an almost *conspiratorial* way.

'I can't let you go, Freddie.' He takes another step closer. 'Not until you've heard what I have to say.' His eyes never leave her face, the gold shrinking back to the edges of his blue irises, making him look almost human again.

'I know you're scared,' he whispers, taking another, measured step, treating her the same way he would a wounded animal. 'You only have to be scared a moment longer.'

He whines, long and low; an Omegan sound, pitched to soothe her. Make her malleable and compliant…

'Give me the gun,' he purrs, and Freddie's eyes flash crimson. With a pained howl, she wrenches herself away from the manipulation and squeezes the trigger.

Will throws himself to the side, barely avoiding the bullet. He hits the chest freezer and rolls, landing on his front and pushing himself up immediately.

Freddie makes a run for the barn doors but Will is too fast. He bowls into her, pinning her up against a beam and grappling for the gun. Freddie's hat comes off and then another shot is fired, ripping a hole in the roof and showering them with splinters. Will twists Freddie's wrist and the little 6mm tumbles to the floor, lost amidst their kicking feet.

Determined to knock her out, Will slams the Alpha's head against the wood, but Freddie yanks pepper spray from her pocket. She aims it over her shoulder, her heart surging with a moment of triumph when she hears Will cry out in pain. She throws herself forwards, breaking free, but Will turns with her and gets a hand in her hair.

Pain shoots across her scalp and Freddie snarls.

'No! Get *off* me!'

She wrenches herself out of the grasp, losing a fistful of curls in the process, and stumbles out of the barn. There's no thought for pain; she just needs to get to her car and get away. Now, now, now. She has to escape… She *has* to.

Skidding through the snow, her heeled boots useless on the icy ground, Freddie pulls out her cell phone and stabs at the buttons on the screen. She risks a glance back over her shoulder but Will doesn't seem to be following her.

Panting hard and soaked with sweat, she falls into her Jeep and fumbles for the keys, trying to get them into the ignition. The line connects and the phone starts to ring. She sobs when she drops the keys, and bends down to pick them up, shaking so hard it looks fake.

As she straightens, a crowbar smashes through the driver's window. Freddie screams and tries to fight him off, but Will is too strong. He reaches inside the Jeep and hauls the Alpha out by her armpits, using his greater size and leverage to drag her towards him.

Freddie kicks at the door, trying to off-balance him, but he is sure-footed on the snow and determined. As the ground slips away, she realizes there is only one thing she can do. She takes a deep breath, opens her mouth wide, and screams.

***

'Jack! Jaaaaack! Help!'

The tinny recording of Freddie Lounds rises from Jack's cell phone on the glass desk between them. It is chilling to hear, and no matter how unpopular the tabloid journalist might have been, nobody wished her such a fate.

‘Freddie Lounds left me that message three hours ago,’ Jack says, looking up from the phone to Will, who it sat across from him. ‘Her cell signal is dead, now.’

When the Omega says nothing, Jack adds,

‘Last call was traced to the nearest phone tower… In Wolf Trap, Virginia.’

What have you done, Will?

‘We have her on security cameras at a gas station, filling up her car.’ The Head of the BSU glances towards Hannibal, before returning his attention to Will. ‘Six miles from your farm.’

Sitting the corner, Alana Bloom tilts her head, her brow furrowed with worry.

‘Freddie was supposed to interview me,’ Will says, golden eyes downcast and knuckles white, looking for all the world like a concerned Omega. ‘She never showed up.’

Jack frowns.

‘Why are you granting interviews to Freddie Lounds?’

Hannibal looks to Will, and the other man lifts his chin and meets Jack’s gaze directly.

‘I *owed* her one,’ he says grimly. In his peripheral, he sees Alana wince, remembering the article that Freddie wrote when he was incarcerated. The one that drew Matthew Brown to him; the Alpha he sent to *kill* Hannibal.

Hannibal looks at Jack.

‘Surely Freddie Lounds has more enemies than Will?’ he suggests, but the other Alpha shakes his head.

‘Not in Wolf Trap, Virginia.’

Will sighs.

‘I live in the middle of *nowhere*, Jack. If someone wanted to take her it’s…’ He shrugs. ‘Not a bad place to do it.’

Jack shares a look with Alana, and then turns his focus again on Will.

‘Where were you at two o’clock this afternoon?’ he asks, clasping his hands together before him.

It is Will’s turn to frown.

‘I was at home… why?’ He scoffs. ‘You don’t think *I* had anything to do with this, did you?’

‘The last time we spoke, you expressed strong feelings about Freddie,’ Alana says, drawing his gaze.

Will rolls his eyes.

‘Yeah, I dislike her! But that doesn’t mean I *murdered* her!’ He looks to Hannibal, seeking support from his Alpha.

‘Jack, what are you suggesting?’ Hannibal asks, cutting through the vagaries and piercing the other man with his stare. ‘Will was at home this afternoon; I can vouch for him.’

‘You were with him?’ Jack asks dubiously, and Hannibal nods.

‘Yes,’ he lies, grateful that Will maintains a perfect poker face. ‘We’ve been spending a lot of time together, as of late.’

‘And neither of you saw or heard from Freddie Lounds?’ Jack checks, to which both Alpha and Omega shake their heads.

The Special Agent sighs, and spares Alana one more look before shrugging at the men opposite him.

‘Alright,’ he says wearily. ‘I guess that’s it, then. Thanks for coming in.’

‘Of course.’ Hannibal smiles as he stands, and folds his coat neatly over his arm. Will rises in stony silence and turns away to fetch his coat before Jack can say anything else.

They don’t speak until they are past Security, where they hand in their visitor’s badges and wrap up in the warmth of the lobby; it is only when they are in the safety of the parking lot that Will turns to his Alpha.

‘Thanks for covering for me,’ he mutters, his eyes hovering somewhere near Hannibal’s scarf. ‘Jack wouldn’t have dropped it if you hadn’t stepped in.’

‘Are you going to tell me what happened?’ Hannibal asks, closing the distance between them and brushing a curl of hair away from Will’s face.

Will tilts his cheek into the caress, humming softly at the simple enjoyment of the touch.

‘Maybe over dinner?’ he suggests, and Hannibal’s heart skips a beat. He nods and enfolds Will in his arms, nuzzling up under his jaw to scent him before placing a tender kiss to his throbbing pulse.

‘Are you bringing the dogs?’ he asks, purring when Will scents him back, brushing the cold tip of his nose along his throat and nibbling at the dusting of stubble on his chin.

‘Yes,’ the Omega breathes, sliding his lips across Hannibal’s cheeks until he finds his mouth and then giving him a brief but deep kiss. ‘We’re all staying with you.’

***

‘During Courting, it’s traditional for the Alpha to hunt and the Omega to make a meal from whatever their intended provides.’

Will lifts his grocery bag as he speaks, setting it down on the kitchen counter to pique Hannibal's interest. He looks up, meeting his Alpha's gaze, and smirks.

'But we've never been traditional, have we?'

He pulls a thin package from the bag and places it on the black marble between them.

'I provide the ingredients…' Fresh tomatoes follow, ripe and juicy from the grocery store. 'You tell me what we should do with them.'

Hannibal unbuttons his suit jacket.

'What's the meat?' he asks, eyeing Will curiously.

His Omega pushes the grease-paper parcel towards him.

'What do *you* think?'

Narrowing his eyes, his heart squeezed tight with hope and excitement, Hannibal unknots the string and opens the package, staring down at the delicately marbled muscle.

'Veal?' He leans closer, scenting the flesh. 'Pork, perhaps?'

Will smirks at him, and continues to pull ingredients from the bag.

'She was a slim and delicate pig,' he replies, and Hannibal's eyes flicker red, a low purr caught in his throat.

'I'll make you *lomo saltado*,' he says, rolling up the sleeves of his burgundy shirt. His jacket hangs on a hook by the pantry, and his tie is safely tucked inside his waistcoat. The perfect outfit for cooking in.

He pushes the meat forwards, clearing a space in which to prepare onions and garlic for the dish.

'We'll make it together,' he adds, and pulls a blade from the knife block beside him. Grins as he passes it to Will, adding a mischievous, 'You slice the ginger.'

Will meets his eye, returning the grin as he realizes the innuendo. His belly clenches with remembered arousal from a late night conversation about sexual experimentation, and he looks down at the root before him, noting the perfect shape and size of the plant; it would be just like Hannibal to make *him* slice and peel the instrument of his own sexual torture. Trepidation would add to both of their arousal, and then Hannibal would take great pleasure in sliding the ginger inside his Omega's bound and spread body, giving him the near-impossible choice of staying relaxed during a caning or flinch from the strikes and make the ginger burn his insides.

No lasting damage, of course… He uses teeth and nails to scar me.

Turning the knife, feeling the weight of it in his hand, Will stares into his reflection, blurred and distorted in the blade. His cheekbones are sharper, his jaw more angular…

He's changing… Becoming more like Hannibal every day…

'I'll be sure to save us a piece,' he says softly, and Hannibal's purrs fill the room as they start to cook.

***

Knowingly eating human flesh is a surprisingly exhilarating experience. Will's heart beats, low and fast, his skin tingles, and every nerve crackles with energy as he spears a strip of marinated meat and brings it to his mouth.

Flavors explode across his tongue; fiery ginger, chili, tomato and bell pepper. Succulent and well-seasoned, it melts between his teeth as he chews, and Will allows his lips a curl a fraction when Hannibal, sat across from him at the dining table, lifts his own fork to his lips.

Warmth creates a rosy glow in the halls of his memory palace, and Hannibal savors the feeling of *peace*, of *fullness*, as he tastes Will's offering. This is it; no more games, no more hiding. They can be together, truly, as themselves, and achieve anything.

'The meat has an interesting flavor,' he says, rolling the sirloin across his tongue. 'It's brazing… Notes of citrus.'

'My *palate* isn't as refined as yours,' Will replies, swallowing his mouthful. Hannibal nods, and selects another piece of meat.

'Apart from humane considerations, it's more flavorful for animals to be stress-free, prior to slaughter.' He lifts the fork back to his mouth and tilts his head as he considers what he is eating. 'This animal tastes frightened.'

'Hm.' Will stabs another chunk and brings it to his lips. 'What does "frightened" taste like?'

What did I taste like, all those weeks you toyed with me? Drove me mad with Heat? Terrified me with my own body and mind?

'It's acidic,' Hannibal replies, irises ringed with thick crimson as more flesh disappears behind Will's teeth.

'The meat is *bitter* about being dead,' Will teases, and chuckles softly. His smile, so gentle and sweet, so rarely seen, draws an immediate one from Hannibal, crinkling his eyes with mirth. After a moment, however, he sobers, and looks back at his plate.

'This meat is not pork,' he says quietly, ending the charade. He looks again to Will, wondering if he will be honest with him, finally.

Will sighs.

‘It’s long pig,’ he admits, and his heart falters at Hannibal’s expression. The Alpha’s face softens, his eyes warming to a rich burgundy, cruel lips sweetened by success and curving into a boyish smile… Hannibal all but *glows*, and he is so fucking *handsome* in that moment that Will thinks he might kill everyone in the world just to see that *joy* one more time.

He takes another shaky bite of food, the soft string music a soothing accompaniment to their silence. After swallowing, he reaches for his wine, swirling the Malbec to release the aroma and dipping his nose to the rim as he’s seen his Alpha do so many times. After inhaling, though, he remembers that he can only have the odd sip, and lowers the glass as he speaks.

‘You can’t reduce me to a set of *influences*.’ He watches as Hannibal takes a drink, pairing the wine with the aftertaste of meat. ‘I’m not the product of *anything*.’

When Hannibal looks at him, Will shakes his head, frowning.

‘I’ve given up good and evil,’ he explains, and finally allows himself a taste of alcohol. ‘… For behaviorism.’

Hannibal considers him, thinking over everything they’ve been through. His beloved has come so very, very far…

‘Then you can’t say that I’m evil,’ he says, and Will dips his head, blue eyes heavily ringed with gold.

‘You’re destructive,’ the Omega replies. ‘Same thing.’

‘Evil is just destructive?’ Hannibal narrows his eyes at Will, their shadows twisting and coiling in the air before them, playful as kittens during their verbal spar. ‘Storms are evil, if it’s that simple. And we have fire. And then there’s hail…’

Will smiles, sensing where this is going. Hannibal doesn’t disappoint.

‘Underwriters lump it all under “acts of God”,’ the Alpha finishes, nodding down to the dish. ‘Is this meal an act of God, Will?’

Will huffs a laugh, and eats another piece of meat. He closes his eyes, concentrating on the sensations in his body. The grind of molars against muscle. The rasp of breath, harmonious in them both…

As he chews, as he eats the flesh of his victim, Will feels Hannibal’s mind reaching for his own, breaching the distance between them. Golden light seeps into the cracks of his psyche but it is darkness that fills him, consumes him until there is nothing left but *them*... They…

They are whole, and they are *together*.

He blinks, staring across the table as Hannibal opens his eyes a moment later, each of them showing the colors of their caste. Hannibal’s red bleeds into Will’s gold, pulsing with every synchronized heartbeat shared between their bodies. The very air bends away from them, shying from the intensity of their gaze.

Will sets his knife down and presses a hand to his stomach.

‘I’m pregnant,’ he says, a lump forming in his throat when Hannibal lowers his own cutlery with a nod. He watches as his Alpha rises from the table, tracking every movement of his lithe hunter’s body, turning in his chair when the other man kneels before him.

Hannibal covers Will’s hand with his own, each of them touching the belly in which their baby slumbers. Tears prick his eyes as the endless hunger inside him is *finally* sated. Even a moment of peace will last him an eternity. He has everything he’s ever wanted, after all. A lover, a killer… a child.

A family.

‘I know.’

Kō No Mono

Chapter Summary

With all the cards now on the table, Will and Hannibal's relationship seems stronger than ever, terrifying Alana. But Hannibal tempts Will's wrath when he manipulates Mason into terminating Margot's pregnancy.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Apologies for another huge delay between posts - I've just been super busy with a new nephew, uni work, running a new business and then starting a new job this week. Manic!!!

I'm definitely continuing the story, all the way through past S03 still, just expecting longer periods between each post. It's probably become pretty normal now! I'll do my best to post asap, but doubt I'll ever get back to the amazing 25k words per week that I managed with Season 1!

Anyway, thank you to all of those who have stuck with this; your patience is greatly appreciated. As always, comments are very welcome and muchly enjoyed. They give us writers life!!!

Apologies for any typos and errors, please feel free to point them out. xxx

*** TRIGGER WARNING ***

Miscarriage caused by car accident. Hysterectomy. Grief of lost child. Reference to labour and pregnancy.

ELEVEN

Kō No Mono

I'm pregnant.

It's inside him. The darkness. The *hunger*. The same destructive force that drives Hannibal to kill… It is *his*, now… It gives him strength. Purpose.

The ravenstag is wounded. Beaten down, ripped apart from the inside. Antlers tear its belly. Its *womb*. It stumbles, bones snapping as it crashes to its knees.

Am I driving my baby mad? Am I corrupting the sweet life inside me?

The wendigo watches, its gaunt face impassive, hollow eyes blind to the suffering it causes. Its ribs flare beneath coal-black skin and it parts its lips to taste the exquisite terror, the *suffering*, of the offering before him.

You've changed me.

Will punches his fingers through the walls of the stag's uterus. It is an Omegan creature, for an Omegan birth. Will's skin *hurts* at what he's doing, but he has to evolve. He has to escape the smothering blindness of his innocence.

He chokes on the regret of his rebirth. Blood eases the way but there is still pain. The ravenstag is dying, because of him. It is no longer a chrysalis for his higher self.

He is the stag, now… *He* is the monster.

That's it, my love. Just a little more… Push…

Hannibal's voice, so gentle and kind, soothes the sting. Will shreds the sac holding him hostage, freeing himself from its bindings. Antlers rise from his skull, twisted and sharp, the perfect crown to accompany his mate's. He gasps for breath, every inch of his mutilated body on fire, the snow melting beneath him as muscles cramp and flex, testing their new life even as the ravenstag cools and dies.

Alpha…

Will's eyes open wide, spilling tears at what he's done. What he's *going* to do. He opens his mouth, teeth too white against the darkness staining his skin, and screams.

Hannibal comes hard, snarling his victory into the bleeding bite at Will's throat. He bends over his Omega, his knot swelling to seal them together, seed held tight inside the other man's pulsing body.

Will moans, long and low, his scent sweetening at the feel of his Alpha's release. In the forest of his nightmare, it is the wendigo that mounts him, and he cradles it close between his blood-slick thighs, shivering when it spills hot power into him. Shadows flood his veins as they move together, oozing out until every inch of him is as dark as his partner. Until they are the same. United.

I love you.

The thought comes, swift and strong, and Will loses his breath at the vision of himself, reflected in dead eyes. He's beautiful. Powerful. A strong and worthy mate.

'I love *you*,' he gasps, clinging to his demon's emaciated shoulders, riding each shockwave. Their antlers clash, tangle, fuse, and the pleasure spikes ever higher. 'I love you… I *hate* you,

but I love you.'

Hannibal groans, long and low, suckling at Will's syrupy blood as the Omega snarls his affection. He can feel his partner urging for more, unsated and furiously seeking relief; Will rocks up against him, golden eyes sightless as he clings to Hannibal's shoulders. Fear and arousal creates a thick smog in the hot air between them, and it is when Hannibal looks down into his face that realizes he's alone in their bed; Will is hallucinating something else.

The intercranial pressure of forced detox and Prodromal Phasing has caused permanent damage; Hannibal knows this. He also knows that sanity is a fictitious concept, and that Will's ability to imagine anything gives him unlimited potential.

'What do you see, *mylimasis?'*

He murmurs the words into the other man's forehead, trying to find the connection between them, desperate to know what haunts his beloved's subconscious. There's a snatch of something – bloodied snow, bodies writhing in the mud, towering trees and the cloying stench of *death* – and then it's gone, and Will is shaking with climax, scorching their bodies with his release.

Hannibal…

Will opens his eyes, gazing up into his Alpha's smug, handsome face. He blushes, his body still humming, and Hannibal quirks an eyebrow.

'Well, that looked good,' he teases, shifting his weight and bracing himself beside Will's trembling form, locked together but refusing to crush him. 'What did you see?'

'I…' Will frowns. He touches both their cheeks, sliding his fingers through curls and silky strands to check for horns. Swallows, an odd lump in his throat, and shakes his head when he finds nothing. 'I don't remember.'

Am I disappointed, or relieved?

Hannibal narrows his eyes at the lie, mirroring Will's touch and pushing damp curls back from his temples.

'You promised to return me the courtesy of truth,' he warns, trailing his fingertips across Will's stubble, down his jaw to the stumbling pulse in his neck, right under the ring of bloodied teeth marks. 'Are you going to make me hurt you?'

'You already did,' Will replies, stroking Hannibal's shoulders, pressing up against him as drying sweat chills him.

'Hm…' Hannibal skates his hand across Will's collarbone, over a dusky nipple still stiff with arousal, and then slips his arm around his back to hold him close. He forces himself to be satisfied with Will's presence, his affection, nothing more, but it has always been his mind that intrigued him.

Feeling the tension in his Alpha's body, Will sighs softly.

‘I was… *reborn*,’ he confesses, mumbling the words into Hannibal’s shoulder. ‘You were there, and it was dark… *We* were dark.’

We were monsters.

‘“He whom Love touches walks not in darkness”,’ Hannibal murmurs, trailing affection across Will’s forehead. ‘Remember, Will; I’m right beside you.’

‘You *led* me into the darkness,’ Will argues, but there’s little fire to the words, now. ‘You blinded me.’

‘I let you *see*,’ Hannibal replies, and Will can’t help but stare up at him, surprised by the passion in Hannibal’s voice. The Alpha’s eyes gleam, and his accent thickens with the strength of his emotion. ‘For so long, you blundered in half-truths and denial, unwilling to admit the power inside yourself. I set you free.’

Will swallows, and allows Hannibal to kiss him. He arches into the touch, welcoming the embrace before guiding his Alpha’s head down onto his chest, feeling Hannibal smile as he listens to his heartbeat.

Hannibal thinks he set him free. Will’s stomach tightens at the very idea of it. Bonded, pregnant, owned… A killer and a mate, his strings still firmly held within the Alpha’s grasp.

I don’t feel free. But I will be.

***

‘What do you think about “Charlotte”?’

It’s the next morning and they are in the kitchen. Sunlight flows through the windows, adding a soft glow to the room. Will is curled up in the armchair, reading Jung’s *Man and His Symbols*, with Buster and Winston asleep on the floor beside him and the rest of the dogs either dozing in the pantry or sniffing outside in the garden. Hannibal is preparing side dishes for their surprise dinner this evening, creating a perfect arrangement of foie gras and brioche slices, displayed on peacock feathers and garnished with a midnight blue moth. It is another moment of startling domesticity; an easy bliss that has no place in their lives, and Will wonders what horror will befall them to rebalance the scales.

Hannibal doesn’t glance up.

‘I don’t believe I know anyone called Charlotte,’ he replies, creating unerringly perfect slices.

Will scoffs.

‘As a *name*,’ he explains, turning the page. ‘For the baby?’

Hannibal’s heart tightens and his breath catches. He has to set the knife down for fear of missing the bread; his hands are trembling.

‘You know it’s a girl?’

Will glances up again, and Hannibal knows they are both surprised by how hoarse he sounds. When the Omega smiles, something inside Hannibal fractures, and he knows that if anything were to happen to this man, to *them*, his world would end.

'Just making lists,' Will says quietly, struck by the expression of fierce, dark devotion on the other man's face.

Pure love; the sort that makes a man kill.

'May I suggest a few?' Hannibal asks, smiling as he returns to his prep. He waits for Will's hum of assent and then continues, 'Diana, goddess of the hunt and childbirth. Saulė, the Lithuanian sun goddess. Katarina; after my mother.'

'Any boys' names?' Will replies, no longer reading the words on the page before him but watching Hannibal's hand on the blade; the strong, slender fingers, honeyed skin and, of course, the deep scars along his inner wrists.

'Artüras, for the legendary king,' the Alpha suggests, placing the moth in the center of the platter. 'Wilhelm, perhaps, after my ancestor…'

'Victor, for victorious,' Will finishes, and Hannibal looks up to see if he is being mocked. Will grins and sets the book aside, rising to saunter over to his partner. He perches against the edge of the counter, looking at Hannibal, and idly traces the veins in the marble countertop. 'I'll keep them all in mind.'

'Of course.' Hannibal sets the knife aside and wipes his hands on his apron. 'It's your decision.'

'I'd rather it be a joint one,' Will murmurs, rubbing his stomach, wondering when he'll start to show. If he'll find it unnerving, or attractive. Can't keep the sadness from his voice as he adds a quiet, 'Unless you're not around, of course.'

'I have *no* intention of leaving you, Will.' Hannibal's gut clenches at the tang of distress, and he lifts his mate's hand to kiss to his knuckles. 'Or allowing *you* to leave *me*.'

'Nobody can predict the future, Dr Lecter.' Will pushes to his feet and claims Hannibal's lips with his own. 'Anything could happen.'

Hannibal kisses him reverently, and only shakes his head when they part.

'I'll always be with you, Will. You're mine.'

***

The killing of an Ortolan Bunting has long been considered an art. Hannibal keeps a flock of the tiny songbirds in his basement, and listens to them sing when he works on his creations. Yesterday, after Will killed Freddie Lounds, he had separated two of the endangered creatures and kept them in darkness, feeding them nuts and seeds until they could no longer move.

Now, he places each fat, sleepy bird into a glass jar, and fills it to the brim with brandy. The birds barely flinch; as stuffed as they are, death must be a sweet relief. Plucking the damp feathers from the tiny bodies, no bigger than his thumb, Hannibal is quick to shallow fry them and then flambés the alcohol, carrying a bowl of fire into the dining room, where his beloved waits.

‘Among gourmands, the Ortolan Bunting is considered a rare but *debauched* delicacy,’ he says, setting the platter down between them. Waiting for the flames to die down, he takes his place across from Will.

They are in opposite seats to their previous meal together; Hannibal chose the settings deliberately, to show Will their equality. Testament to how far he’s come, Will is wearing his seafoam green shirt, the same one he’d worn when so utterly broken by Hannibal’s manipulations, paired with the fine tweed blazer, Omegan cut, that Hannibal had bought for him a few weeks ago.

Then, and now. Before and after.

‘A rite of passage, if you will,’ Hannibal adds, dipping his head and grinning at his mate. Will’s lips curl into the tiniest of dark smiles, and he lowers his gaze to the offering between them as Hannibal continues, ‘Preparation calls for the songbird to be drowned alive in Armagnac. It is then roasted, and consumed whole in a single mouthful.’

Will quirks an eyebrow at the little birds resting inside a dish of waning fire.

‘Ortolans are endangered,’ he murmurs, to which Hannibal merely smirks and unfolds his cutlery from his napkin.

‘Who amongst us is not?’ the Alpha replies, shaking the fabric loose to tuck into his shirt collar. The ortolan will drip oil, and he doesn’t want to ruin his suit.

‘I haven’t been gorged, drowned, plucked and *roasted*,’ Will says, sighing as he considers the man across from him. ‘Not yet.’

Another smirk, and then Hannibal leans forward.

‘Traditionally, during this meal, we are to place shrouds over our heads,’ he says. ‘Hiding our faces from God.’ His eyes gleam red. ‘I don’t hide from God.’

He picks up his ortolan, holding the burning hot bird by the head, and waits for Will to do the same. Will pulls the little sacrifice from the dish and considers it; the cooked eyes, the crispy beak… the little legs poking out where the feet have shriveled away in the flames…

‘Bones and all?’ he whispers, a great sadness welling in his chest to think of such a sweet creature, killed for him.

A terrible, quiet sense of power.

‘Bones and all,’ Hannibal confirms, smiling with pride and pleasure.

Will swallows, his heart fluttering, and then opens his mouth. He slides the little bird onto his tongue, his senses exploding at the flavor and texture; crispy skin, sticky Armagnac, rosemary and garlic from the oil… He chews, crushing small bones and organs between his molars, and the liquor from the bird's lungs spills out, hot and sweet, laced with pine nuts and pumpkin seeds.

It is disgusting, and yet, somehow, one of the most delicious things he's eaten.

Hannibal purrs, watching the warring expressions on Will's face. A frown, a puzzled look, half a smile and then a grimace. His own initiation was much the same.

He lifts his bird to his lips and engulfs it whole, taking great delight in popping the ribs to release the brandy, tasting each flavor individually and then as a whole. The treat alone would be enough to bring tears to his eyes, but it is Will that makes his heart constrict and his stomach twist with excitement. Will's eyes slide shut, a look of utter bliss on his face as he takes what is rightfully *his*. The power to kill. To eat the slain.

No more hiding.

Will swallows, small bones scraping down his throat. When he opens his eyes, he sees Hannibal do the same, the gesture so reminiscent of sex that he aches.

'After my first ortolan, I was euphoric,' Hannibal says, picking up his knife and fork. He hums, remembering that day, so many years ago, when he'd been but a child. 'A stimulating reminder of our power over life and death.'

Will's gaze drifts, stormy blue eyes focused inwards.

'… I was euphoric when I killed Freddie Lounds,' he admits, and Hannibal pauses with a forkful of foie gras and warm fig compote.

'Tell me,' he murmurs, seeking out Will's gaze, desperate to share this intimacy with him. 'Did your heart race when you murdered her?'

Will frowns, considering. He feels cold; the warmth of the fire behind him serves only to chill his hands and arms. He wants to be held; to be cradled in Hannibal's embrace and never let go.

'No, it didn't.'

'A low heart rate is an indicator for one's true capacity for violence,' Hannibal says, voice rough with unvoiced purrs. He eats, and, after chewing, adds, 'Your design is evolving. Your choices affect the physical structures of your brain.'

Will huffs, and picks up his own cutlery, cutting into the accompanying dish

'Killing is changing the way I think.'

Blood on the snow. A crown of antlers and a scream… Have I gone too far?

‘Yes,’ Hannibal breathes, and the *pleasure* in it makes Will sick. He chews slowly, the rich liver tasting like ash in his mouth, and then glances up at his Alpha, misery etched into the lines around his eyes. He’s worn down; tired and defeated. Hannibal has won, through sheer force of will.

He is not without mercy, however, when it comes to his Omega.

‘You must understand,’ Hannibal continues gently, ‘that blood and breath are only elements undergoing change, to fuel your radiance… Just as the source of light is burning.’

Will closes his eyes, a dark and wicked idea already forming. Hannibal has always been able to inspire him; pushing him further than any other.

He knows what he needs to do next.

I built Hannibal a monument… I’ll build myself an effigy.

***

The nightshift at the Baybridge Office complex is painfully dull. Busy studying for his Economics final, Todd Preacher, tries to ignore the odd noise when it first interrupts him. He’s been the parking lot attendant and pseudo security guard for the last ten months, and nothing has happened except one argument between a jilted lover leading to a tire slashing, and one homeless man keeping dry from the rain.

Nobody’s due until at least 6am, but there is a rattle of wheels and the squeak of hinges. Is it a shopping cart? Frowning, Todd goes to the door of his little booth, glancing up and down to see where the noise is coming from.

A hellish blaze warms the walls of the entry slope, and then he sees it.

A body strapped into a wheelchair, burned black and still on fire. Flames roar in the cold air, licking over cracking flesh and melting the plastic stitching into the leather seat.

Todd watches, numb with panic, as the wheelchair speeds on and on towards the reserved space marked F. Lounds. When the front wheels hit the yellow bumper, breaking the toes of the corpse, he gags. Manages to reach for the fire extinguisher and then thinks better of it, grabbing his cell phone, instead. He punches in the numbers and waits, unable to tear his eyes off the monstrous sight.

‘911, what is your emergency?’

‘Fire,’ Todd says, and then shakes his head at himself. ‘No, I mean, murder… I mean… Someone’s on fire at the parking lot of Baybridge Offices… I… I think they’re dead.’

***

‘Orthodontics confirmed; it’s Freddie Lounds.’

Brian Zeller gives a nod to the dental records pinned on the lightbox beside him. It's 2am, when all sensible people should be at home, in bed, but he's in the BSU laboratory with Jimmy, Jack, Hannibal and Will. Personally, he doesn't know why Jack called Will and his Alpha in the middle of the night – Will no longer works for the FBI and Hannibal is only guest consulting on big cases. But Jack does as Jack pleases, so he's not going to argue.

'Little bit of kerosene,' he continues, gesturing down to the corpse laid on the table between them. 'Voom! Incendiary journalism.'

He grins at his own joke, even though Jimmy, across from him, is the only other one to do so. The other Beta takes over with the differential diagnostic.

'See; no scabrous crust on her chin – she was dead before the match was struck.'

'Blood's already pooled to the lowest parts of her body,' Zeller adds, looking at Will when the Omega turns his head towards him. It's wrong to think so right now, but he looks *good* – neat haircut, smart blazer and a better fitting plaid shirt… Being bonded suits him. 'She's been dead at least twenty-four hours.'

Will nods, stormy eyes roving the dead Alpha's legs and torso.

'Freddie had a longing to be noticed,' he says softly. He sighs, his breath catching. 'She was noticed.'

'Freddie Lounds's ultimate failing,' Jack replies, 'was her inability to keep *herself* out of her own stories.'

Even as Will prowls one way around the table, so too does Hannibal, moving opposite him in a classic hunting pattern.

'There's more to this story,' Zeller says. 'Check it out.' He rolls the body towards him, showing off the side and back of the body, where a large chunk appears to be missing.

Hannibal's heart skips a beat and he has to work hard to suppress a shiver of pleasure. A purr threatens but he swallows it down, his mind jumping back to dinner the other night. The meat that Will gave to him, wrapped in greased butcher's paper…

"She was a slim and delicate pig."

'Severely burnt bodies tend to split along lines of musculature,' he says, feigning confusion. 'But that looks like an incision.'

'Yeah, that's right,' Zeller replies, 'He cut out her psoas muscles.' Swallows the bitter taste and adds, 'With, er, what looks like a hunting knife.'

"It's long pig."

'A peculiar trophy,' Hannibal murmurs, not daring to look towards Will, fearing the red glow in his eyes.

Jack frowns.

‘But why did he *burn* her?’

Zeller lets the body drop and shrugs.

‘How many people has Freddie Lounds burned in her career?’ he replies coldly, still angry over the way Freddie fucked him to get information about Will.

Hannibal gazes down at Will’s offering to him; the marbled flesh, the perfectly charred skin and broken nails… The too-white teeth in a coal-black skull…

‘Whoever did this is not striking out against Miss Lounds’s exploitative brand of journalism,’ he says softly. ‘This is something else. This is something… sacred.’

‘Freddie Lounds *had* to burn,’ Will purrs, golden eyes locked on his victim but his words shooting straight for his mate’s heart. ‘She was *fuel*.’

Blood and breath are only elements undergoing change to fuel your radiance… Just as the source of light is burning…

Miss Lounds is a physical manifestation of Will’s transformation. It is poetic and beautiful.

‘Fire destroys and it *creates*,’ Will continues, glancing at Jack, when the broad Alpha scowls at him. ‘It is… mythical.’ He sighs, just as he sighed over the Ortolan Bunting. ‘She won’t rise from the ashes… but her killer will.’

Yes, my love… You will, Hannibal thinks, his eyes thickly ringed with the color of his caste and a deep rumble in his chest as he adds, as a parting gift,

‘He’s the one to be noticed, now.’

***

Two lines means I’m pregnant…

Margot sits at her dressing table, staring down at the home pregnancy test, waiting for it to change.

Two minutes is an eternity.

Please, please be positive… Please say it worked.

The paper changes… Darkens… Two lines, intersecting in the middle. A distinctive cross.

It’s positive.

Her heart catches in her throat, and tears well in her eyes. She did it. She’s pregnant. She can finally, *finally* escape from Mason’s clutches.

Now, she just has to tell Hannibal and Will.

***

‘Do you know what this is about?’ Will asks, pacing back and forth before the tall windows of Hannibal’s office. He’s still tired from last night’s charade; creating the tableau for Hannibal and then attending the post-mortem with him. Even when they got home, they hadn’t slept until dawn; brutal, primal sex had turned softer, sweeter, and they had made love for hours before the dying embers of the bedroom fire. Now, at 10am, they are waiting for Margot Verger to arrive, the Omega having specifically requested that both men be there for her session.

‘I had no idea you two had even met,’ Hannibal says, to which Will rolls his eyes. Hannibal smiles, his eyes glinting, and amends, ‘Other than that brief introduction outside my office, of course.’ He frowns, jealousy winding up his leg like a snake. ‘How often have you socialized with her?’

‘Not often,’ Will replies, his gut churning when he thinks back to their last time together. The heat; the smell of her… Having sex with her to spite Hannibal, even though his Alpha was still with him, whenever he moved inside her… ‘The first time, she came to talk about you.’

Hannibal nods; he expected this. Two Omegas, both with the same wicked potential. And Will did pose the question of his patients comparing notes.

‘And the second?’ he asks, curious as to his own apprehension of the answer.

Will looks away, choosing not to reply. Hannibal narrows his eyes, taking in his mate’s rigid shoulders, clenched fists hidden inside trouser pockets and jaw tipped down in defiance.

Something happened between you.

Before he can ask another question, Margot’s familiar light knock comes from behind the door, and Hannibal rises from his armchair to greet her. The young woman is pale but composed, wearing a Chanel jumpsuit and heels, complete with an ever-present Omegan collar.

‘Dr Lecter,’ she says, voice low and smoky but tight with nerves. Hannibal takes her coat and extends a hand for her to sit in her usual seat; Will remains stood between them, even when the Alpha returns.

‘You asked to see us both,’ Hannibal says, crossing one knee over the other and clasping his hands together. ‘May I ask why?’

Margot swallows, the pale column of her throat moving behind the leather and silver necklace. It is an intricate design; stamped with the Verger brand and laid with diamonds. A beautiful shackle to remind the Omega of her place.

‘I came to tell you the truth about my situation,’ she says, her gaze steadfast on the Alpha’s face. ‘About my… condition.’ She swallows, and twists her hands in her lap. ‘I’m pregnant.’

Hannibal suppresses the snarl of rage itching the back of his throat. He can sense Will's shock, his naïve surprise at the announcement, and merely inclines his head a fraction as he stares down the Omega foolish enough to attempt to steal *his* mate away.

'I assume the child is Will's?' he asks coolly, earning a low gasp of dismay from Will. Margot, however, merely nods.

'I took Heat Stimulants before going to see him,' she says, her voice as monotonous as always when discussing things of great significance. 'I knew he was pregnant, and at his most fertile… Two Omegas are more likely to produce an Alpha, after all.' She sniffs, and glances down at her flat belly. 'There's no baby,' she continues. 'It isn't even an embryo yet, but here I am… Feeling… *maternal*.' Her eyes flash gold, and her scent thickens. 'I wanted you both to know.'

Hannibal's rage tastes like a bonfire on his tongue. Margot's confession means little to him, aside from the fury that *she* carries a part of Will inside her, now, too. But *Will*… He can feel his mate's pain… The raw disappointment at being *used* so heartlessly…

You trusted her. And she betrayed you. Just as you trusted me.

'You conspired with your unborn child to liberate yourself,' Hannibal says, maroon eyes boring into Margot's downturned face. 'You've made Will an unknowing accomplice.'

'I got what I *wanted* from Will,' Margot replies, a frown creasing her brow as she continues, 'but I didn't understand what I was *taking* until the strip turned blue…'

She lifts her gold-ringed eyes to the Omega by the window; Will is a shadowed outline against the sharp white of the afternoon light. All Margot can see are hunched shoulders.

'I'm not proud of myself,' she adds, and *that* gets a reaction from Will. He turns his head, his eyes pure, molten gold, and scowls at her.

'Nor should you be.' A flicker of something crosses his face, gone before it can form. 'You said –'

'I lied.' Margot sighs and returns her attention to Dr Lecter. Will huffs and nods, grinding his molars together. He flexes his hands in and out of fists and then looks to his Alpha.

'Did you know?'

Hannibal returns the glare with calm impassivity; he must be strong for Will during this difficult time. He is the source of stability in their relationship, after all.

'I was aware of Margot's goal of having a child,' he replies, glancing at his patient, silently awaiting the couple's judgement. 'I was not aware you were the means to achieving it.'

I would never permit such a thing.

Will considers the reply, considers *who* is replying, and then nods, accepting it. Hannibal doesn't lie to him anymore.

He sighs, and turns back to Margot.

‘What do you want from me?’

‘Nothing,’ Margot replies, quirking a perfectly-penciled eyebrow at him. ‘Or as much as you’d like to give.’

‘“As much as I would like to give”?’ Will stares at her, horrified by her apathy.

Margot lifts one shoulder in a bored shrug.

‘I always thought men, Omegan or not, were an optional extra in childrearing,’ she says. She glances at Hannibal again, subconsciously seeking his approval. ‘I’m not *opposed* to a male influence…’ Her expression hardens. ‘As long as it’s not my brother. He’s… not *good* with children.’

‘I’d like to be involved,’ Will says, swiftly and decisively. He doesn’t even look to Hannibal before making his choice. ‘It’s my child, too. I want to be there. I want them to know me.’ He swallows. ‘And their siblings.’

One big happy family…

‘I’ll be your birthing partner, if you be mine,’ Margot quips, and Will thaws just a little at the idea of it; the *reality* of having a child with another Omega, barely three months after his own.

Hannibal watches the interaction stoically. He is careful not to react, not to allow any of his now-blistering rage to filter through the bond to his mate, no matter the hurricane battering his insides.

Margot’s fetus must be terminated. Immediately.

***

Mason Verger is one of the city council’s most generous benefactors, and regularly opens his farm and stables for free daytrips to the state-fostered children.

After a morning petting the horses and sows, and cuddling little piglets with no idea they are just weeks away from slaughter, the under ten’s follow their social worker back towards the main hall, and the school bus waiting for them.

‘Come on, kids!’

The children traipse past Mason, who is leaning back so as not to be too conspicuous, watching the little ratbags from over his wire-rimmed glasses. The last to enter the barn is a mournful looking boy, barely six, if the Mason’s file on him is correct.

Slowly removing his lambs-leather gloves, Mason waits for just a moment and then speaks.

‘What’s *your* name?’

The little boy stops, surprised that Mr Verger himself is speaking to him.

‘Franklin,’ he replies, his voice high and clear.

‘Do you like *horses*, Franklin?’ Mason asks, and produces a carrot from the pocket of his mink-lined coat. He holds it out, smirking at the erotic image it presents, and almost groans when Franklin’s greedy little hand reaches for the shaft. ‘Whoa!’ He yanks it back, teasing, and then hands it over, allowing himself to ruffle Franklin’s woolen hat.

Behind them, one of Margot’s horses whinnies, eager for the treat. Franklin holds out the carrot and the creature munches it contentedly.

Mason considers killing it and having it stuffed… He might display it in Margot’s bedroom…

Placing a hand on Franklin’s neck, Mason guides him back towards the middle aisle.

‘Where do you stay, Franklin?’

‘With Mama and Shirley,’ Franklin replies, gazing up at Mason with all the guileless charm of a swine. Mason wants to hurt him.

He flips his coat back and slips his hands inside his pant pockets.

‘Mama is not your real mamma, is she?’ he says, and a little of the light dims from Franklin’s bovine brown eyes.

‘She’s my foster,’ he admits. Mason nods, an odd light dancing in his icy blue eyes.

‘Do you *love* Mama and Shirley?’

‘And Kitty Cat,’ Franklin corrects, and Mason has to close his eyes and purse his lips so as not to smack the little imbecile right there.

‘And Kitty Cat, yes…’ He leans down, his expression growing cold and hungry. ‘Franklin… You can’t stay there anymore… With Mama and Shirley and Kitty Cat. You have to go away.’

It’s the truth; he has a well-placed assistant in the office who has terminated Franklin’s placement with ‘Mama June and Shirley Grady’, and instead moved him to a generic, rundown children’s home. Franklin won’t be going to the home, however; he’ll be joining Mason here, in a specially designed playroom.

Franklin scowls.

‘Who says?’ he pouts, and Mason *really* wants to hurt him, now. He imagines his eyes flashing red, but, of course, they don’t because he’s not an Alpha.

‘The *government* says,’ he snaps. ‘Mama lost her job, and her approval as a foster home.’ He doesn’t, of course, reveal that *he’s* the one responsible for making her lose her job, and

therefore her approval… ‘You can’t *see* her after this week.’ He shrugs. ‘You can’t see Kitty Cat after this week, either.’

I might kill and stuff that animal, too.

‘Why not?’ Franklin demands, and Mason has just about lost his patience, now.

‘Maybe they just…’ He grabs for his hair and Franklin flinches, expecting a slap. ‘Maybe they just don’t *want* you, anymore, Franklin.’ The words cut deep, and Mason calms himself as he regains control of the situation. Of himself. He sniffs and pushes his glasses further up his nose. ‘Is there something *wrong* with you?’

Franklin’s lower lip trembles, and big, juicy tears well in his eyes. Mason lowers himself to a crouch before the child, enchanted by the glistening saltwater, and continues in a hushed tone,

‘There *is*… isn’t there?’ He feigns concern, and pulls his special silver case from his pocket. ‘Oh, here… Here, now… Here we *go*...’

Mason hurries to extract two little squares of blotter paper from the container, furious that his cold hands are moving slowly, worried that Franklin’s tears will spill and he won’t produce more. Margot rarely cries, these days.

‘Can you… can you put your head back?’ He nudges Franklin’s chin, encouraging him to keep the tears on his cheeks, and then grabs him by the throat. ‘Just like *that*,’ he croons. ‘*Perfect*…’

He presses the little square to Franklin’s cheek and the fabric soaks up the saltwater; the physical evidence of the child’s fear and misery.

Mason is so hard it hurts.

‘*Perfect*,’ he whispers, engrossed in his fetish. ‘That’s *perfect*…’

He stows the square back in the case, safely sealed so it won’t dry out, and then jumps to his feet. Grins, jubilant with his success, and plucks an expensive candy from his other pocket.

‘Have a chocolate!’ he cries, tossing the gold-wrapped sweet into the air for the child to catch. He’s already striding away, leaving Frankie – or whatever his name is – to make his way back to the bus for his last few days in his current home.

Next week, the real fun begins.

***

That evening, Hannibal joins Will and the dogs at the farmhouse. Will cooks for them; a simple but mouth-watering venison stew and crusty bread, which Hannibal pairs with a hearty Rioja, and they eat at Will’s rickety little dining table.

‘We should move your bed upstairs,’ Hannibal says, nodding to his mate’s makeshift sleeping area. ‘Perhaps use one of the bedrooms for its designated purpose?’

‘I want to keep my sightlines clear,’ Will mumbles, hunching down over his bowl. ‘Anyone could break in and I wouldn’t know if I was upstairs.’

‘Do you also intend the keep the nursery downstairs?’ Hannibal replies, taking a sip of wine.

Will frowns at him, though not in anger. There is a puzzled vulnerability to the other man’s expression, his eyes clouded.

‘We’re not staying in Baltimore?’

When he speaks, Will’s voice is very quiet. It’s a painful admission, but he *wants* to move in with Hannibal. He wants to join his Alpha in his territory, even if it means leaving the peace and solitude of the countryside. His baby will need security, and stability – if he’s going to stay together, he can’t haul their little one from Wolf Trap to the city every other day.

Hannibal swallows, his mouth feeling dry.

‘I’d like that very much,’ he says softly, and reaches for Will’s hand. Covers the back of his knuckles with his fingers and then lifts them to his lips, kissing the nails. Will’s skin smells of garlic, onions and spices from the stew, as well as blood from the meat, soap and, very faintly, his own wildfire and honey scent. ‘We can be very comfortable together.’

Will hums, but pulls his hand away. He returns to eating, even though he’s not hungry, alternating mouthfuls of stew for tiny sips of the wine he’s been given. His free hand drifts down to his belly, unknowingly stroking the softening skin, and Hannibal smiles when he notices. He sits back, dabbing at his lips with a napkin.

‘Have you considered your pre- and post-natal care?’ he asks, eyes gleaming in wicked delight at the surge of salty fear from the other man. ‘I’ll do the dishes.’

He rises, collecting their plates and bowls and carrying them into the kitchen. Will grabs the glasses and follows, loading everything into the dishwasher before Hannibal can roll up his sleeves to do it by hand.

‘Will –’

‘Kiss me,’ Will says, taking Hannibal’s wrists and pulling him closer. Their lips meet in a messy embrace but quickly settle into a familiar rhythm, and Will walks backwards towards the suddenly very conveniently placed bed.

He sits heavily on the mattress, toeing off his boots and spreading his thighs so Hannibal can stand between his knees. Hannibal winds his fingers through Will’s soft curls, cherishing every texture of the man beneath him, and dips his mouth to Will’s thundering pulse point, scenting the stubbled flesh of his throat.

‘You’ll likely need a c-section,’ he murmurs, nuzzling the words into Will’s ear, hands busy unbuttoning his Omega’s plaid shirt. ‘Do you know where they’ll cut you?’

‘Haven’t given it much thought,’ Will mutters, busy unbuckling Hannibal’s belt and tugging his zipper down. ‘Does it matter?’

‘Male Omegas carry their wombs higher,’ Hannibal says, pushing the cotton from Will’s shoulders, nibbling at the puckered scar of Jack’s old gunshot wound and then resting a palm flat to the other man’s navel. ‘They’ll cut here, and go down from the inside. There’s a risk of nicking an intestine, but the baby has a higher chance of survival.’

‘I *really* don’t want to talk about it,’ Will growls, shoving Hannibal’s pants down and leaning forwards, burying his nose in the thatch of coarse hair above a hardening erection. ‘Just fuck me.’

‘Language,’ Hannibal whispers, though the continuing caresses in Will’s hair and the low purr in his chest belies his pleasure at the crude order. ‘Lie down, *mylimasis.’*

Will kisses and licks his way along Hannibal’s length, his senses exploding with the taste of him, his crest throbbing in time to his heartbeat. He takes the very tip into his mouth, sucking down the bitter salt, and then releases it with a faint pop and a grin. Hannibal shudders, watching as Will lies back across the bed, raising his arms up above his head and crossing his wrists in wanton submission, gold-ringed eyes locked on the Alpha towering over him.

‘You wicked boy.’ Hannibal toes out of his shoes and pushes his trousers further down his legs. He takes his time removing the rest of his outfit, burgundy eyes locking Will in place as the Omega squirms beneath him. ‘Look at your body.’

Will scoffs, flicking a quick gaze down his chest towards his softening stomach. He shrugs, hoping his cheeks aren’t as red as they feel.

‘Beautiful,’ Hannibal whispers. He kneels in prayer before the offering and slides his hands up Will’s strong thighs, undoing his jeans and tugging them down an inch at a time, bowing his head over the freshly exposed erection and taking it deep into his mouth.

Will arches with a sharp cry, unexpected pleasure crackling up his spine. He clenches his hands into fists, determined to keep them where they are, and lifts his knees even higher to give Hannibal more room.

‘Perfect,’ Hannibal breathes, engulfing his mate once more, sucking and swallowing before releasing him and hiding his watering eyes in the crease of Will’s hip. ‘Every version of you.’

‘No matter how scarred?’ Will mumbles, conscious of the ugly mess on his shoulder. Hannibal doesn’t reply immediately; he kisses his way across Will’s torso, swirling his tongue in and out of his belly button in a lewd imitation of a favored pastime. His strong hands keep Will’s hips from bucking up at the suggestive movement, and he spends a great deal of time teasing each sweet nipple, nipping between dangerous teeth and rasping the spread of his tongue over the stiff buds.

‘Every mark is a story,’ he purrs, smirking down at the trail of pink and red marks left on his Omega’s skin. ‘A battle fought; a lesson learned.’

‘A betrayal,’ Will reasons, releasing his hands from their imaginary bonds and stroking down the rounded muscles of Hannibal’s shoulders. ‘A mistake.’

As the other man settles on top of him, Will takes Hannibal’s right hand between his own, turning it over to once more expose the ridged scars on his inner wrists. Hannibal’s eyes flash red, and he holds very still as Will lowers his mouth to lick along the old wounds.

‘Will…’ The Omega’s apology is a sweet balm to the residual ache, and Hannibal closes his eyes at the reverent touch. Will continues to kiss the silvered flesh and he rocks down against his mate’s answering hardness, desperate to push inside him but unable to balance.

Will releases Hannibal’s arm and the Alpha braces himself on the bed. He reaches between their hot bodies and takes hold of himself. Will curls up, lifting his hips higher and draping his knees over Hannibal’s elbows, giving the other man as much room as possible, nodding just once when Hannibal glances at him.

Hannibal plunges inside in a single, swift move. Will squeezes his eyes tight shut, muscles aching at the sudden invasion but nerves humming at the feel of his bonded mate filling him. He rolls down, a low groan slipping free at the remembered feel of pleasure, the first hint of orgasm to come.

‘Hard,’ he whispers, digging his nails into Hannibal’s arms, his flank, scrabbling to get a grip on him. ‘Fuck me hard.’

‘There’s no rush,’ Hannibal replies, though he obliges with a sharp thrust that has Will crying out. The sound spurs him on, fanning the flames of his desire, and he bows low over his mate, mounting him with speed and strength. The pace gives Will no chance to catch his breath, each wave getting shorter and sharper, drawing heat and tightness and white bliss from deep within him.

This is what he craves. This is his haven; he can’t think when they’re joined like this, when they are nothing but heat and the sound of slapping skin, ragged breath…

He meets every push with a squeeze and a pull of his own, trying to suck Hannibal as deep inside him as he can. Sweat dribbles down his forehead, dampening his hair, and his crest rubs against the rumpled quilt beneath him. Hannibal’s breath washes over his face, tasting of wine and meat, and Will kisses him, messy and open-mouthed, clutching at the other man’s silky hair.

‘Come for me,’ Hannibal growls, chasing the spiraling fire inside him. ‘Come for me, beloved.’ He reaches between them again, pumping Will’s erection in time to the thrusts, setting every nerve ending alight with his touch.

Will’s voice cracks around a whimper. He moans, bearing down with near-painful intensity.

‘That,’ he gasps, ‘That… That, that…’

Hannibal snaps his hips and Will shudders. He bares his teeth, his eyes leaking tears at the sharp sweetness of the climax, and his release hits their chests. Hannibal’s throat tightens at

the smell of it, the sound and sight of his mate's pleasure, and then his own orgasm is upon him. He pushes forwards, forcing Will to bend beneath him, pumping his seed deep inside the Omega before sealing them together with a knot. Triumph glows crimson in his eyes, and he jerks Will's head to the side, lunging for his throat and locking his teeth around the thundering pulse.

'Hannibal!' Will bucks, a second, smaller orgasm wracking him at his Alpha's display. He wraps his arms and legs around the other man, riding the waves crashing in his ears, one hand behind Hannibal's head to keep him suckling at the ring of bloody teeth marks, just listening to his heart beating.

They stay together long after Hannibal's knot deflates. Will stretches out beneath him, Hannibal draped half over him to keep their tacky bodies warm, legs entwined and hairs scraping as they continually stroke each other.

'I want you there,' Will says, tracing idle patterns over his mate's shoulders. 'When it's born.'

Hannibal presses his hand flat to Will's stomach again, wishing that, with all his heightened senses, he could feel the baby's heartbeat. He'd heard it, that day Will held him at gunpoint, but he'd been on the verge of Rut, then. Now, he can only imagine its sound.

'I promise,' he says, leaning down to kiss Will's lips. 'For as long as we're bonded, I will never leave you.'

***

Blood and breath will fuel your radiance…

Trapped in sleep, Will can only shake and curl in on himself as nightmares whip his mind.

A burning body, strapped to a wheelchair, careening out of control… The fear he felt right after the surge of adrenaline; the rush of exhilaration… The *power*…

This is my design.

From somewhere deep inside him, a scream rises. The bellow of a monster given form by his recent acts. Bonding Hannibal. Carrying his child. Killing Randall Tier and burning an effigy to Freddie Lounds…

Sweat soaks the sheets, but he's cold as ice. Will hugs the duvet closer, snuggling into the lingering trace of his Alpha's scent, but it's fading. It's all fading. He's being burned alive by the guilt of what he's become. The lies he's told and the things he's still going to do.

I can't do this anymore.

A sharp knock on his front door jerks him awake. Will can hear his own gasps, loud and hoarse over the whimpering of the dogs. They're worried, but they keep their distance from the bed. Maybe they sense how dangerous he is.

He staggers to answer it, wondering who the hell is disturbing him at… Oh… It's late morning, judging by the numbers on his clock. No wonder he's alone; Hannibal must have left for work hours ago.

Alana waits on the porch, rubbing her gloved hands against the bitter Virginia cold, occasionally reaching down to fuss Applesauce's ears. Her expression becomes more guarded, blue eyes like chips of ice when Will finally staggers closer and opens the door.

Jack-Dog and Bruce lead the pack outside, and they race Applesauce to the fields at the back of the property, barking madly at the prospect of play. Will and Alana watch them go, each of them giving the other a moment to adjust to their presence.

Will can smell himself; slick and sweat and fear and rage, all mingled together into a scent both delicious and repulsive. He scowls at the Beta. His former friend. Former colleague.

Former crush.

'Do we *do* friendly visits, anymore?' he asks, voice as hoarse as though he really had been screaming all night.

Alana's forehead creases and her lips turn down.

'This isn't a friendly visit,' she replies, a hint of sadness in her voice. Will swallows, sniffs and wets his lips. He glances off in the direction of the dogs, instinctively listening for their yips to check they're okay.

'Oh,' he says, forcing himself to focus again on his guest. 'Er… What kind of visit *is* it?'

'I guess I'm trying to convince myself of something,' Alana says, staring intently at him, clearly trying to peel back the layers to see the real him underneath.

Too much has happened for Will to allow that.

He narrows his eyes, the merest twitch, and then settles for frowning at her.

'You think I killed Freddie Lounds,' he says, and Alana shrinks in on herself.

'Did you?' she whispers, tears glistening on her lashes.

His heart beats, a steady thud in his chest, and Will merely tilts his head, employing the same eerie impassivity that Hannibal so often uses on him.

'What do *you* think?'

Alana's anger flashes to the surface again, and her cheeks flush red even as her lips thin.

'I think that's the wrong answer to tell somebody who is already wondering what you're capable of,' she warns. Her self-righteous indignation is like a splinter, and Will feels his eyes prickle as they flood gold.

‘I told *everyone* Hannibal was a killer and *no-one* believed me,’ he growls. Then he smirks. ‘Just like *no-one* would believe *you* if you said *I* was a killer.’

A tear rolls down Alana’s cheek, and she shivers at how *cold* Will is. How hard. How much like his Alpha he has become…

‘I don’t think Hannibal is good for you,’ she whispers, ‘and I think your relationship is *destructive*.’

‘Hannibal was good enough for *you*,’ Will retorts, and Alana flinches like she’s been slapped. The insult is to both her hypocrisy and the fact that she was the mistress; Hannibal’s callous reminder during their last dinner has left a deep wound.

Exhaustion washes over him and Will sighs. He’s *done* with it all.

‘You should be afraid,’ he says quietly, and Alana’s blue eyes widen in fear, haunted by her own failures. Will is so tired even his bones ache, and it takes everything in him not to cradle his belly.

Please let it be over, soon.

‘I want you to have something,’ he continues, retreating into the house. He pads barefoot on the cold floorboards to his desk, and withdraws his gun from a locked drawer. It’s an ex-police automatic, in good condition but second to his father’s revolver for comfort.

Will kept this gun as a souvenir from his time in Homicide. It’s the one he should have used to kill Samuel Coby.

It sits heavy in his palm, and Will is cautious as he returns. Alana’s gaze drops immediately to the weapon, and she tenses as though trying not to flinch away.

Will holds it out. A peace offering, of sorts. Even after everything, he still cares about her. He still wants her to be safe.

‘Whoever you *are* afraid of,’ he says, gold-ringed eyes hovering near the top buttons of her coat; ‘don’t be afraid to *use* it.’ He offers it to her, handle first, and nudges it against her arm when she hesitates. ‘It takes 9mm rounds,’ he continues. ‘Buy a box. Find a range. *Practice*.’

Alana takes the gun, holding it clumsily in her gloved hand. Will nods, his chest tight and belly aching.

All he can now is wait.

***

At the same time Will is giving Alana a gun, Hannibal opens his door to Mason Verger. The Beta, wearing a fur-lined coat and pale three piece suit of the finest silk-wool blend, struts around the office like he owns it, puffed up on his own importance and pride.

What a bloated ego you have, Hannibal thinks, closing the door behind him. *How rich your heart must taste…*

‘Not bad,’ Mason muses. He shrugs out of his coat and drops it over the back of Hannibal’s chair, assuming the other man will pick it up and hang it for him. ‘A little plain, but not bad.’ He laughs, and looks around at Hannibal, who is indeed hanging up the coat. ‘I should think so; for the money I’m paying you.’

Hannibal’s eyes gleam, and he continues to observe the way the Beta makes a show of fiddling with his fountain pen and desk clock, scent-marking each piece as his own. No doubt he expects a response; typical Alphan anger at the gall, perhaps.

How amusing.

‘Please,’ he says, calmly, gesturing to the seats and taking his own.

Mason, of course, strides right past his correct place, removing his suit jacket as he does so.

‘I would like to tell you about camp,’ he says, in his obnoxious, overloud, nasal voice. He throws himself down onto the chaise lounge, on his back with his head on the cushion, hands clasped over his chest and ankles crossed. ‘It was a *wonderful* childhood experience that keeps coming back to me.’

Hannibal smooths out a crease from his trouser leg and crosses one long knee over the other, allowing Mason the stage. Passive observation is, after all, the best way to get the measure of a man.

Thus far, Mason falls woefully short.

‘Papa paid for the whole thing,’ the Beta continues. ‘Every summer. All 125 campers on Lake Michigan.’

New money. How vulgar, Hannibal thinks, remembering his grandfather’s view of the way many self-made millionaires often flaunted their riches. It reeked of inferiority.

Aloud, he merely says,

‘Your father was a generous man.’

‘I’ve continued his charitable work, today,’ Mason says, not bothering to acknowledge Dr Lecter’s compliment. ‘Most of the campers are “unfortunates” who would do *anything* for a candy bar.’ He chuckles, and then cackles with laughter at his own joke.

Hannibal tilts his head, watching impassively but amusement twinkling in his eyes.

You would stoke Will’s righteous anger. Perhaps we could kill you together.

‘Maybe I took advantage,’ Mason continues, no trace of remorse in his voice. ‘Maybe I was rough with them…’ He waits for Dr Lecter to say something, but this psychiatrist is harder to

crack than all his others. ‘I’m not holding anything *back*,’ he says, trying a different tact. ‘It’s all okay. I got a *walk* on the charges.’

Hannibal listens to the pitifully obvious attempts to shock him.

‘What was your penance?’ he asks, and Mason twists onto his side, straightening his wire-rimmed glasses.

‘I got five hundred hours of community service,’ the Beta replies. ‘I worked at the dog pound and received some court-ordered “therapy”.’

Hannibal nods.

‘Was therapy helpful?’ he asks, wondering how anyone less than he could begin to unpick a gnarled ego such as Mason’s.

Mason sniffs a laugh, and confirms his suspicions.

‘I got the doctor involved in something unethical, so he’d cut me some slack,’ he admits, lying on his back again and re-clasping his hands over his waist.

Hannibal doesn’t even blink. Doesn’t back down from the challenge.

‘That’s not helpful,’ he says plainly, no emotion behind it for Mason to interpret.

‘Papa called it “altruistic punishment”,’ Mason replies, gazing at the ceiling, enraptured in his own success.

Bored of Mason’s waffle, Hannibal calls to him, drawing his attention once more.

‘Mason.’ He gestures to the patient armchair when the brat looks over at him. ‘Please.’

It is not a request.

‘Oh…’ Mason swings his legs down to sit upright, adjusting his collar at the correction. He wants to defy Dr Lecter, but to do so would seem… petulant. Still, the rebuke nags at him, and he finds himself thinking of ways to piss the good doctor off.

Perhaps he could get Dr *Lecter* involved in something unethical. After all, it would be good to get the scoop on dear Margot’s secrets and session notes.

He straightens his waistcoat and then sits in the armchair, just like the rest of Dr Lecter’s patients. In an unconscious attempt to mimic the Alpha’s casual pose, he also crosses his legs, clasping his hands in his lap.

Hannibal’s sharp gaze lingers on Mason’s crumpled suit jacket, lying dejected on the couch. It reminds him of Franklyn’s used tissue…

His neck snapped and vertebrae crunched beneath my fingers.

‘Papa was a *prodigy* in the field of meat,’ Mason continues, and Hannibal forces himself to focus. ‘But his *real* genius was for human nature.’ He stares into Hannibal’s eyes, ice-blue irises dancing with a mad light. ‘He could *look* at a man and see his weakness.’

Hannibal almost smiles at the attempt to unsettle him. He doesn’t need a psychology degree to diagnose Mason Verger. He’s nothing more than a spoilt child, with feelings of inadequacy stemming from his caste as a Beta. A deep-rooted sense of devotion to an Alphan father figure… Hatred for his Omegan sister… Too much money and no taste.

‘Your father is dead,’ he says calmly. ‘A boy’s illusions are no basis for a man’s life, Mason.’ The words cut deep and, for just a moment, Mason falters. Hannibal sees the eyes cloud over with pain, and he knows he’s struck a nerve.

He decides to twist the knife.

‘Margot is the only family you have left.’

And look how you treat her.

Mason considers for a moment and then sits forwards. He rests his elbows on his knees and holds his head in his hands, scraping his fingers through his hair until it’s even wilder than before.

‘My sister loves me, Dr Lecter,’ he says, sighing through his nose. ‘She *has* to; I’m her guardian.’

‘Vergers are noted expansionists,’ Hannibal replies, and Mason blinks, just once, at the implication. The Beta sits back, offended and trying hard not to show it. Scrabbling to regain some sense of control, offended by the very idea that Margot might find someone else to replace him. That he would no longer be important.

‘And *I* am the *sole* Verger heir,’ he says, more sharply than he means to. Somehow, Dr Lecter has wormed his way under his skin, unsettling him more than he’d like.

Hannibal pretends to consider the words.

You fucked my mate, and you used his pregnancy to fuel your own change. I won’t share Will with you. I won’t share his children with you, Margot.

He quirks his lips into the barest hint of a smile.

‘Unless biology provides another.’

There’s a pause, a heartbeat’s moment where Mason simply stares, and then his brow furrows and he understands what Dr Lecter is suggesting.

Margot is trying to get pregnant.

‘What has she told you?’ he demands, but the good doctor only shakes his head.

‘I cannot discuss the nature of my sessions with Margot,’ he reminds him. ‘Just as I cannot reveal anything you tell me here, in confidence.’

Mason narrows his eyes.

‘If she’s *planning* something –’ he begins, but Hannibal merely brushes a crease from his suit pants.

‘It would be best if you discussed your concerns with her yourself,’ he says. He re-clasps his hands, and makes a point of shifting his shoulders, ending the conversation. The seed is planted, after all. Mason’s self-doubt will water it to fruition in no time. ‘Now, tell me more about camp.’

***

Freddie Lounds’s funeral is held in the snowy grounds of the Baltimore Cemetery at 1 o’clock the following day. It is bitterly cold, and the attending mourners huddle inside their black coats and black scarves, trying not to stamp their feet against the toe-numbing chill.

‘“Thou preparest a table before me, in the presence of mine enemies”,’ the priest intones, reading from his battered and ear-marked Bible, every word carried on a cloud before his blue-tinged lips. ‘“Thou anointeth my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely mercy and goodness shall follow me, all the days of life”.’

A little way back from the funeral-goers, partially hidden by an old oak tree, Alana watches the ceremony. Panic has settled into gnawing grief; not for Freddie Lounds, but for Will. For herself. For everything that has been, and never will be again.

As if drawn by her thoughts, the tell-tale crunch of footsteps, a measured gait, approach her. Alana turns her head, her cheeks pink with cold and sadness, stained with salt from her tears. She watches as Will, looking fine in his herringbone coat – *from Hannibal,* she remembers – and cashmere scarf, walks up to her, emotionless as the marble angels around them.

She feels sick.

‘I’m here to mourn Freddie Lounds,’ she says, turning back to the image of the coffin and wreaths, bouquets of flowers and garlands wrapped in black ribbon.

So many lives, touched. So many memories.

‘I can’t imagine that’s why you’re here,’ she adds, risking a glance at him.

Will shrugs.

‘There’s all *sorts* of reasons why I’d go to Freddie Lounds’s funeral,’ he replies, sickly melodic in his confidence. ‘It’s common for a killer to revisit their victims after death,’ he adds, giving voice to Alana’s unspoken accusation. ‘Attend funerals, return to crime scenes…’

‘Anyone suspicious?’ Alana asks, still frowning at him.

Will smirks.

‘What, besides me?’

‘That was implied,’ Alana snaps, and Will sighs, regret carried on a breath of air up and away into the winter sky.

‘You were expecting me.’

‘“It’s common for a killer to revisit their victims after death”,’ Alana replies acidly.

‘I’m not here to dance on Freddie Lounds’s grave, if that’s what you’re getting at,’ Will says. Alana rolls her eyes at him again, their bodies close but a gaping chasm between them.

‘You’re not here looking for her killer, either.’ She nods towards the mourners. ‘You don’t seem particularly interested in the crowd.’

Will turns to his former friend and colleague, his first support network since leaving New Orleans, and raises an eyebrow.

‘Are you *profiling* me, Dr Bloom?’

You said you never would. Promised me you never would.

Alana opens her mouth to answer, considering the question and all its implications. Considers, and then…

Will takes a deep breath as the silence continues, releasing it slowly.

‘I’m here because…’ He weighs his words carefully, selecting just the right seeds to make the doubt blossom even more fully inside Alana’s mind. ‘My *Alpha* suggested it would be *therapeutic*.’

Alana’s reaction is exactly what he imagined. Shock turning her eyes sapphire, a flash of anger… And then her expression hardens as she sets her jaw and fights the swell of nausea at what he’s suggesting.

Hannibal knows I killed Freddie, and he’s encouraging me to revisit my victim.

What else will he encourage me to do?

***

Arriving at the office that evening, Will can’t help but smile when he sees Hannibal in just his waistcoat and pants, having removed his suit jacket after a long day with patients. He leans in for a kiss before unbuttoning his coat, sidestepping his Alpha and hanging it on the hooks by himself, leaving Hannibal to close the door.

Hannibal smiles, sealing them away from the outside world with a click.

‘How was the funeral?’ he asks, watching as Will unwinds his scarf and drapes it over another hook.

‘Overwritten and full of false compassion,’ his Omega replies, smirking at him from over his shoulder. ‘Just like Freddie’s articles.’

Hannibal chuckles. He does love Will’s acerbic tongue.

Resuming his place behind his desk, he gestures to the crystal decanter before him.

‘Would you like a drink?’

‘Not for another six months,’ Will mutters. He sighs, trying to roll some of the tension from his shoulders, and looks almost longingly at the deep-set leather armchairs. ‘At least I haven’t felt too nauseous, lately.’

‘Perhaps pregnancy is beginning to suit you,’ Hannibal says, grinning when Will rolls his eyes at him. He notes the looser sweater on his Omegan mate, the thick fabric adept at hiding the start of a softening around his middle. He unstops the decanter and pours two generous measure of whiskey into matching glasses, holding one out for his pregnant mate.

Will takes the tumbler with a frown. He drags the silk-cushioned chair from Hannibal’s drawing table and sits at the end of his Alpha’s desk, safely illuminated amidst the gloom of the office, sheltered inside a pool of light from the brass lamp.

‘Alcohol free,’ Hannibal promises, raising the glass in a toast and taking a sip.

Will copies the gesture, his frown changing when he tastes it. Realizes he’s drunk it before, and enjoyed it.

‘What’s in it?’ he asks, staring into the honeyed depths. Grins and glances up through his lashes. ‘Or should I say, *who?’*

Hannibal laughs softly, holding the liquid on his tongue for a moment before swallowing down the sweet, smoky taste.

‘Me,’ he admits, setting the crystal down. ‘Centrifugated blood.’

‘I do love a sweet taste,’ Will murmurs, tipping the glass to his Alpha for the kindness. ‘You don’t have to drink it with me, though; you’re not compromised.’

Hannibal frowns.

‘You consider pregnancy compromising?’

Will grimaces, realizing how it must sound. But, then, Hannibal says he accepts him, all of him, even the less *savory* aspects of his personality.

‘A little,’ he admits. ‘My body is no longer my own…’ He huffs, scrubbing at his beard. ‘I hadn’t really thought about it… The changes in my body or the impact it would have… Not

until…'

'Margot,' Hannibal finishes, and Will nods sadly.

'I've been so preoccupied with *taking* a life, I'm… er, having trouble wrapping my head around *making* one.' A bitter laugh. 'Let alone two.'

Mine and Margot's… Our babies…

Hannibal keeps his gaze on the decanter, fearful of the possessive rage burning him alive. He won't share Will; not with anyone. Not even a child.

'When men become fathers, they undergo biochemical changes that affect the way they think,' he says quietly.

Will tilts his head, an odd flare of affection warming his chest, at both the words and at being correctly gendered.

'You said the same thing happens when men become killers,' he reminds him, to which Hannibal hums and smiles.

'Fathers can be killers,' he reasons. Then he pauses, something so achingly vulnerable in his eyes that Will's heart hurts to see it. 'What sort of father would you be?' he asks, and, to his horror, Will finds himself choked with tears, his eyes burning as the gold flares bright with his emotion.

We're having a baby together. We're going to be fathers… Just as we were Abigail's fathers…

'I'd be a good father,' he manages, hoping, *praying* that somehow, this time, it will be true.

Hannibal's eyes flash red.

'How quickly we form attachments to something that does not yet exist,' he murmurs, more for himself than Will.

It's a fetus, still. Many Omegas miscarry during the first trimester… Anything could happen.

'No, I'm not attached,' Will lies, chewing on a thumbnail. 'I'm…' He fumbles for the right word. 'I'm only… *anticipating* attachment.'

Hannibal smiles, drawing Will back to serenity.

'We have a deep-seated need to interact with our children,' he says, thinking back to the guardianship contract, and Will's fierce protection of his parental rights as the sole care-giver for their children. 'It helps us discover who we are.'

Who will I be, once our baby is here? Once we are a true family again?

Something in the way Hannibal says it, makes Will think he's speaking from experience. He frowns at him, trying to see past the veil draped so meticulously across the monster inside.

‘Have *you* ever been a father?’ he asks, wondering if he’s ever asked this question before. Heat-mad and sick with hormones… Hannibal has told him nothing of that time, and his memories are fractured… Twisted fragments of a nightmare.

A deep sadness returns to Hannibal’s eyes, stirring something; an echo, perhaps, of an evening in bed, bodies locked together, sweat cooling and lips meeting in gentle affections…

‘I was to my sister,’ the Alpha says quietly. ‘She was not my child but she was my charge.’ He looks down, eyes crimson and wet with unshed tears. ‘She taught me so much about myself.’

‘Mischa,’ Will says, remembering the *emotion* behind the name, if not the words his mate had spoken months before.

Hannibal swallows and nods, touched that Will has managed to cling to something so dear to him.

‘Where is she now?’ Will asks, struggling to find the answers for himself. ‘Did you tell me?’

‘I did,’ Hannibal replies, offering him a tiny, painful smile. Then his mouth twists and he has to lower his gaze again, torn apart inside and refusing to allow the agony to infect his bond with Will. ‘She’s dead.’ A breath, trying to calm himself. ‘Abigail… she reminded me so much of her.’

Will inhales sharply, his heart in a vice. Sweat dampens his palms and his stomach roils.

‘Then why did you kill her?’ he whispers, needing, more than anything, to *understand* why Hannibal was so cruel.

Hannibal shakes his head.

‘What happened to Abigail *had* to happen,’ he says firmly. He does not regret his choices; he is sad for Will, but his beloved is so much stronger for his suffering. ‘There was no other way.’

‘There *was*,’ Will replies, drowning in Hannibal’s dark eyes, lost in memories of their surrogate daughter. Her strength, her vulnerability…

They could have saved her. Shaped her. Taken her away from it all and made her whole. A family, together.

Hannibal *chose* to kill her, and for that, he will be punished.

‘But there isn’t now,’ he growls.

Hannibal’s skin tingles to hear Will’s paternal rage. It is delicious.

‘Would you protect our child in a way you couldn’t protect Abigail?’ he asks, wondering how Will might respond to the provocation.

Will bites his tongue and looks away.

‘I still dream about Abigail,’ he says, denying Hannibal the satisfaction of a direct answer. ‘I dream that I’m teaching her how to fish…’ His smile wobbles and he shrugs, looking down before his tears fall.

‘I’m sorry,’ Hannibal whispers, the silence thick as molasses between them, sweet and pliant through their bond. ‘I took that from you… I wish I could give it back.’

No… Don’t say that… Don’t make me love you more than I have to.

Will gulps back a whimper, but it’s not entirely successful, and he coughs as he brushes dampness from his cheeks.

Hannibal’s eyes, the irises bright red and sclera bloodshot with grief, cloud over as he stares off into an unseen distance.

‘Occasionally, I drop a teacup to shatter on the floor,’ he says softly, remembering the time when Abigail, high on psilocybin, dropped her cup to watch it break. ‘On purpose.’

His lips curl back from a silent snarl, as he thinks of the pain and humiliation that Will went through, the fights they had and the betrayals.

He may not be riddled with regrets, but he wishes he could have chosen a different path for them all.

‘I’m not satisfied when it doesn’t gather itself up again,’ he finishes, sighing and blinking back tears. ‘Someday, perhaps, a cup will come together.’

Will thinks of his own mind, and the way it fractured under Hannibal’s manipulations. Jack’s fragile little teacup, used only for special occasions… Smashed and splintered by the one person meant to protect him.

I’ll never be whole again.

***

When he receives a call from Jack at ten minutes to midnight, Will realizes why Hannibal had said he needed to spend the night alone.

The Baltimore Cemetery is lit up under the harsh glare of CSI fluorescents, revealing the grisly scene in exquisite detail.

Freddie Lounds’s burned body, unearthed and posed upright, her arms broken and bent, held in prayer before her chest with rope. Additional arms are lashed to her back and waist, raised high above in exaltation and lower in peaceful mediation.

She is a fiery goddess, reborn. A mockery of faith and the sanctity of burial.

She is Hannibal’s gift to Will.

‘Extra parts were harvested on site,’ Zeller says, sounding nauseas as he stares at the tableau. Beside him, Jimmy Price shakes his head.

‘Just *one* night in the ground!’ he gripes. ‘That beats Jesus by 48 hours.’

‘Never thought Freddie Lounds would make it to heaven,’ Zeller says, shaking his head at the monument. ‘Much *less* get deified.’

Stood out of the way, watching Zeller and Price conduct their initial visual analysis of the crime scene, Will shivers as waves of black anger cut through the calm oasis of his Alpha’s offering.

Alana is here.

He turns his head, watching as she ducks beneath the yellow tape and joins Jack on his way over. The Head of the BSU must have called her in for a consult.

Not like he can officially ask me, anymore.

‘This killer is trying to get somebody’s attention,’ Jack says, introducing Dr Bloom to the scene. Alana braces herself, her hands pushed deep inside the pockets of her coat, toes already numb with cold inside her boots.

‘He has direction,’ she says, picking the scene apart for profile markers. ‘His chaos is getting more orderly.’

Jack hums.

‘So, first he burns effigies and now he’s assembling them.’

Alana’s gut twists when she sees the beam of Zeller’s flashlight pass right through a hole in Freddie’s charred skull.

She was killed by a shot to the head.

Will had once told her that, on the rare occasions he came across a wounded or trapped animal that he couldn’t rescue, he killed them with a single shot to the head.

They don’t need to suffer.

‘Burning Freddie Lounds wasn’t his first effigy,’ the Beta growls. ‘Whoever killed Freddie, also killed Randall Tier.’ She doesn’t look at Will, but he knows her words are meant solely for him. ‘Mutilated him, dismembered him and put him on display.’

‘Randall Tier and Freddie Lounds have a connection,’ Jack says, and Will almost smiles at the trail of breadcrumbs.

Me, he thinks, just as Alana looks at him and says,

‘Will.’ The Beta’s eyes water, and she can’t tell if it’s from furious disappointment or the sudden chill. ‘Randall Tier was his suspect, and Hannibal’s patient, and Freddie Lounds was investigating his murder when she died.’

Will comes to stand before them, meeting Alana’s gaze squarely.

‘Freddie Lounds was investigating a *lot* of things when she died.’

Alana takes a second, but she recovers quickly.

‘This *psychopath* was incubating fantasies about killing and is building himself up.’

Will, now facing away to watch as Zeller and Price begin the careful work of photographing Freddie’s body, raises an eyebrow over his shoulder at her.

Say it, he dares, and Alana does not disappoint.

‘Or *someone’s* building him up,’ she finishes quietly, and Will’s heart squeezes out an extra beat of joy at the success.

She doesn’t trust Hannibal. She doesn’t trust me.

Aloud, he merely replies,

‘He has a benefactor who admires his destruction.’ He looks down, huffing out a little laugh. ‘Shiva is both destroyer *and* benefactor.’

This is your apology, and your promise for a better future.

‘He’s being guided,’ Alana whispers, sickness threatening to overwhelm her.

Jack frowns at the corpse.

‘Is this some kind of signpost?’ he asks, and Alana’s head swims as she realizes the truth.

‘Maybe Freddie’s killer didn’t do this.’ She shudders, ice sliding down her spine to settle as a solid lump in her gut. ‘Maybe his *benefactor* did.’

‘Why?’ Jack hisses, eyes flaring crimson.

Will looks to Alana again, tilting his head just a fraction as he waits to see if she understands. If she knows the truth, yet.

Alana blinks, and two tears roll down her cheeks.

‘It’s a Courtship… They’re celebrating a recent bond…’

I bit him after I killed Randall Tier, Will thinks, still meeting her gaze, watching her drown in her own truth. *He’s mine and I’m his.*

‘Are you suggesting one of these psychos is an *Omega?’* Jack demands, failing to keep his voice low. Zeller, Price and a few other forensic officers look round, shocked by the accusation. Will ducks his head as he feels a dozen pitying eyes land on him.

Poor, vulnerable little Omega. How traumatizing, to have such a thing said about your caste.

Alana’s nostrils flare, and she tosses back her hair. She squares her shoulders and glares right into Will’s face, willing him to confess, right now, to all of this. If he won’t, she’ll make him.

‘Omegas are a lot more dangerous than we give them credit for,’ she snarls, baring her teeth at her former friend. ‘With the wrong Alpha, who knows *what* they might be capable of?’

The wrong Alpha, Will thinks, dispassionately considering the flare of rage at the suggestion that Hannibal, his Alpha, is anything less than perfect. *He may be wrong, but he’s the only one who’s right for me.*

***

He escapes shortly after, leaving Jack to show Alana around the scene and continue her evaluation. Will considers driving to the townhouse, barely half an hour across the deserted city. Hannibal will be in bed, having showered after the hard work of creating the display, and may well be lying awake waiting for Will to come to him.

When he reaches the junction, however, Will turns left, towards the interstate out of Maryland. The dogs are still at the farmhouse, after all, and Hannibal’s desire will be piqued if he’s forced to wait. Will is going back to Wolf Trap; he will see Hannibal tomorrow.

He fiddles with the stereo as he drives, flicking past station after station until he lands on one playing classical music; the sort of music Hannibal would have in his Bentley. As he sinks down into the driver’s seat, Will can almost imagine his Alpha sitting beside him, a knowing smile teasing his lips, eyes glinting maroon in the moonlight and golden hands clasped in his lap. Through their bond, he feels a tickle of affection in the back of his mind; Hannibal is awake, and responding to his rush of affection.

Fire is mythical. *Freddie Lounds has, indeed, risen from the ashes.*

Will rolls his eyes at the thought. It’s not his, and yet, as they grow closer, it feels like it could be. The lines blur ever further, filling his mind with his Alpha’s darkness.

He switches to a CD of Cajun jazz music, using the sound to drown out any further thoughts from his mate. Driving out into the darkness of the Virginian countryside, the sound of Hannibal’s laughter is slow to fade.

See you soon, beloved.

***

Friday dawns, cold and clear. Fresh snow clings to Mason’s boots as he crosses the courtyard from the house, and he stamps them clean upon entering the barn.

It reeks of manure, hay and sweet Omegan musk.

‘Good morning!’ he calls, smirking at his sister’s flinch. As much as Margot tries to hide it, she can’t keep from tensing when he approaches. She knows better than to shy away from his touch, of course; she merely freezes in place and accepts his hard pat on the shoulder and kiss to the cheek.

‘Riding *agrees* with you,’ he continues, gesturing to her face as Margot turns from fiddling with the bridle. ‘Puts color in your cheeks.’

He gives the kissed flesh a sharp pinch for emphasis.

‘You’ve got a *bloom*, really,’ he adds, all but bouncing up and down on his toes. It’s true; it’s so true. Now that he knows, he can *see* it. The difference in her. The *smell* of her… The look…

Margot is pregnant.

‘It’s chilly,’ Margot snaps, her eyes flashing gold and cheeks darkening further under the inspection. Her heart hammers in her chest, but there’s no way Mason can know… There’s no way…

‘You’re frequently *chilly*, Margot,’ Mason replies, mocking her explanation and reminding her of their Papa’s favorite word for her – “frigid”. He hums, and imagines his blue eyes flashing brighter for just a moment. ‘I was lying in bed,’ he continues, fingers in a vice around Margot’s elbow, the other hand free to gesture. ‘Composing in my mind, like the deaf Beethoven… and it occurred to me that for a family who owns *breeding stock* –’ Margot flinches at the insult; ‘– we don’t do much of it *ourselves*…’

He knows. Margot’s chest is so tight she can barely breathe. She keeps her lips clamped together, fearing the scream that sits on her tongue, and watches as her brother, somehow, *again*, plans to ruin everything good in her life.

‘I’m *concerned* about the next generation of Vergers,’ Mason says, ending his little announcement by clasping his hands together and narrowing his eyes at Margot.

I know.

Margot bares her teeth at him, a low growl welling up from her chest.

‘I’m just trying to survive *this* generation,’ she replies, and Mason cackles like it’s all a joke. To him, of course, it is.

‘Meat,’ he says, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes, ‘is, at *base*, a people business!’ He starts to pace, fueled by wild, ferocious energy. ‘Nobody understood that better than *Papa*, except now for *me*, of course.’

Margot holds very still, smelling her own scent change as her fears rises. When Mason works himself up like this, it’s like a feeding frenzy of sharks; one wrong move and you’re torn

apart. She notes the rich, sweet aroma of calming pheromones leaking from her pores, and hopes they're enough to combat the Verger madness.

At the same time, she can't help but roll her eyes as her brother engages on another of his self-congratulatory speeches.

'Papa would take me out of school for weeks at a time,' Mason says, frantic in the way that he gesticulates with his pudgy hands. 'While he conducted my… my… my *real* education.'

As he trained you to be the Alpha he hoped you'd be, Margot thinks, but she knows better than to correct him aloud.

'In livestock… *slaughterhouses*…' Mason grins, something forced about it as he unwittingly thinks of Papa's disappointment when he didn't present as an Alpha, but remained steadfast and plain – a *Beta*.

Tal whinnies, and Margot wonders if the gelding can smell Mason's arousal at the memory of watching innocent animals go to their deaths… So much pain and suffering…

Mason comes closer, and snatches up both of Margot's hands between his own.

'I need to share this wealth with a little Verger,' he says, and Margot's stomach drops.

'"A little Verger"?' she whispers, choked with nausea at the very idea of it.

Mason stares into her face, his flabby lips glistening with spit.

'Don't you want an *heir*, Margot?' He sighs, and releases her hands. 'I want a baby Verger.' He rolls his eyes, almost nodding to himself at the slip. 'My own baby,' he clarifies. 'I have viable sperm. I think I'd have an Alpha son.'

He waggles his eyebrows and points at her face.

'It'd be *your* heir, too.' He smirks. 'Auntie Margot… I think a *child* may be what we need to bring us closer together…'

My sperm… Your eggs… A true Verger heir, just like the old times.

Margot's skin crawls, but she manages to keep the high-pitched whine from escaping her throat. Instead, she gulps it down and turns her back on her brother, returning her attention to the bridle.

'Maybe it is,' she says airily, dismissing Mason and his ideas, refusing to give anything away.

Mason scrubs at his forehead, messing up his hair even more and growling under his breath.

'I've said it before,' he mutters, pacing left to right, left to right; 'you've got a *bloom*. Rosy…' Margot's plait is right before him, and he winds it about his fist, using the grip to yank her head back towards him, forcing her to expose her throat. 'Positively *radiant*.'

Margot manages not to wince, but her eyes water in pain. Mason will like that, so she does nothing to stop the tears from welling.

'*What* is your *secret?'* Mason taunts, practically yelling in her ear as he wiggles her head from side to side.

He shoves her away, hard enough to make her stumble, and then laughs again, throwing his hands up in the air as he turns to leave.

'I know, you know,' he says, nodding to himself as he walks backwards from the barn. 'Papa would be so proud of us… Think about it, Margot. A baby Verger. *My* baby.' He bares his teeth. 'It's the closest thing to your own child you'll ever have.'

As the barn door slams shut behind her brother, Margot sinks to the floor. She gasps for breath and then stuffs her knuckles into her mouth, biting down to keep from screaming.

Mason is going to hurt the baby. She has to leave; *now*.

***

Going back to the farmhouse might not have been a good idea. Will is exhausted, but he can't sleep, tossing and turning, seeking the warmth and comfort of his missing Alpha.

At ten minutes past nine, he gives up and bundles the dogs into his car, driving them all back to Baltimore. They will spend tonight here, at least – his bag contains enough clothes for three, maybe four days.

The inevitable loss of privacy and independence…

Hannibal is at work when he arrives. The big house is empty, but it doesn't feel as lonely as the farmhouse. The Alpha's scent, after all, is embedded in everything, his furnishings are everywhere and, when Will strips naked and climbs into the master bed, the sheet smells like his blood, sweat and seed.

You motherfucker, Will thinks, closing his eyes and grinding his hips down into the mattress. *You jerked off this morning, knowing I would show up and come to bed.*

Burrowing under the quilt, he rolls onto his back and slides his right hand down his body. Turns his face into Hannibal's pillow, inhaling deeply, and wraps his fingers around his growing erection, stroking firmly and teasing the sensitive tip. He alternates thrusting up into his hand and rocking down into the bed. The smoky sweet scent of his slick rises in the warm air, and Will imagines Hannibal's hand there, long fingers gathering up the slippery wetness and circling the ring of tight muscle, teasing over and over before suddenly plunging inside.

He shudders, rolling his pelvis further down into the imagined fuck, gripping himself so tight it almost hurts. He's close, he can feel it building like a wave inside him, and he bears down around nothing, knocked from the fantasy by the lack of resistance.

Growling to himself, he angles his hips up so he can get another hand down between his legs, cursing the position for the strain it puts on his wrist. As he turns his head, he realizes there's

something on Hannibal's bedside table, marring the usual pristine surface.

You left me a fucking dildo.

Will groans a laugh and reaches for the toy. Right now, he both hates and loves his manipulative partner. He can feel the amusement of his Alpha, radiating through their bond, and decides to allow Hannibal in for this; a kind gesture, after all, deserves a reward.

He eases the molded silicone inside him, his body so eager to be filled, ready to take a knot at the moment of climax, that there is no resistance. Will moans, long and low, and shudders again when the ridged edges rub against his prostate. He takes one more slow thrust, getting used to the size of it, and then he's fucking himself hard and jerking off with his other hand, trapping himself between two points of ecstasy.

Sweat beads across his forehead and tears well in his eyes. Will bares his teeth, curving his spine so he's squeezing as tight as possible around the toy. It's so much easier to imagine it's Hannibal, now, although he quite likes the idea of pleasuring himself and knowing that his mate is aware of it, getting an echo of his pleasure across the city.

Show me how you like it… Hannibal's thought comes swift and sharp, and Will throws his head back in surrender. He shoves up with the toy just as he slams his hips down and then he's coming, fucking himself through it to drive the orgasm ever higher, ever sweeter until he's keening with how good it is.

That's my boy.

Will collapses onto the rumpled sheets, breathing hard and giddy with pleasure. His muscles have clamped down around the dildo as if it were a knot, so he leaves it where it is and lets his arms flop to his sides.

That was good. Just what he needed after a stressful night and nightmares.

Will pulls the covers back up around him, his eyelids heavy. He is surrounded by the smells of himself and his Alpha, and sleep comes quickly, stealing over him before he's even had a chance to clean up.

Thank you, he thinks, pulling Hannibal's pillow down towards him to curl around it. *I love you*.

***

It's noon before he wakes, feeling more rested than he has in weeks. The toy has slipped out, pushed towards the bottom of the mattress, and Will finds it amidst the bedding when he strips it off to put in the laundry basket. He takes his time in the shower, relishing the jets and overhead spray, stepping out into a cloud of steam when he's rinsed off the layers of shampoo and bodywash matching his scent to Hannibal's.

Lunch is equally unhurried, and Will savors the lingering feeling of anticipation creeping through their bond from Hannibal. His Alpha is eager to see him, and Will is enjoying

making him wait.

He wears his new coat – another gift from Hannibal, in a large wrapped box on the dining table – when he makes the mistake of walking the dogs at the local park. He is explaining, for the hundredth time, that no, he is not a dog walker, yes, they are all his, and no, it's not up to his Alpha how many dogs he has, when his cell phone rings.

'Excuse me,' he snaps, turning his back on an elderly Alphan woman and her grandchild, who are both cooing over Winston and Underbite. 'Will Graham.'

'Hello, Will.' Hannibal's tone is warm, holding traces of laughter at such a formal greeting. 'Bad time?'

'Oh, er…' Will herds the dogs away and brings them into the shade of an oak tree. 'Not really…' He goes to scrub his hair and swears when he yanks on the leashes, remembering too late that he's attached to the dog's collars. 'I'm just walking the pack.'

'Ah.' Hannibal sits back in his desk chair, feeling his mate's agitation and repulsion at being so exposed. 'There's a nature reserve a few blocks away,' he says gently. 'I'll take you tomorrow; there should be fewer people, and you can let the dogs run free.'

'Thanks,' Will mumbles, blushing at the concern he can now feel through their bond. A moment later, his shoulders sag as Hannibal sends him a powerful sense of calm, and he's purring before he even realizes what's happening.

'That's a beautiful sound,' Hannibal murmurs, his throat surprisingly tight.

Will hums, and swaps his cell to the other ear so he can dig out some treats for the patiently waiting pack.

'If you're calling to check I'm coming in for our appointment, the answer is yes,' he says. 'But I want to come earlier. Do you have room?'

'I've had a cancellation at two,' Hannibal replies, smoothly enough that Will can't tell if it's a lie. He has no doubt that Hannibal would reschedule another patient for him. He doesn't want to take advantage of that.

'I'll be there,' he says, and starts passing out the dog biscuits. 'Oh, I made an appointment with an OBGYN today,' he adds, speaking absently as he concentrates on rewarding the good behavior from his pets. 'It's two weeks on Thursday.'

Hannibal's heart skips a beat.

'An ultrasound?' he asks, sitting forwards and opening his diary. 'May I join you?'

'That was why I scheduled it for the evening,' Will replies, dusting off his fingers. 'They couldn't get us in any sooner.'

Us… Hannibal swallows, frowning at his shaking fingers.

‘If you’d like something sooner, I could arrange for you to see a private Specialist,’ he says, his lips curving into a rueful smile at Will’s derisive snort.

‘Yeah, my last encounter with an Omegan Specialist didn’t end too well,’ Will mutters, his eyelids still seared with the image of Dr Sutcliffe’s sawn-open face. ‘I’ll stick with my own doctor, thanks.’

‘Of course.’ Hannibal removes the lid of his fountain pen. ‘What time?’

‘Six-thirty,’ Will says, listening to the tell-tale scratch of Hannibal’s pen nib as he jots down the details. ‘And I want to know the gender, if we can see,’ he adds, another flutter of apprehension in his belly at the idea of the *reality* of it. ‘You don’t have to know, if you don’t want to.’

‘I want to,’ Hannibal says, quickly and quietly. He releases a shaky breath, and nods to himself in the solitude of his office. ‘I want to know.’

Will swallows the sudden lump in his throat, and clicks his tongue at the dogs to start the walk home.

‘So… Jack called me to the Baltimore Cemetery this morning,’ he says, seeking a distraction. ‘Somebody dug up Freddie Lounds and displayed her body as the Goddess Shiva. I’d like to discuss that.’

‘A bold statement,’ Hannibal says, and Will rolls his eyes at his Alpha’s self-congratulations. ‘First a sacrifice, and now a god.’

‘An evolving design,’ Will mutters, because he can’t help but be drawn into the banter with his mate. He scowls, and shakes his head at himself. He can’t do this. Not here. Not now. ‘I’ll be there soon.’

***

Heavy traffic makes him fifteen minutes late for his appointment, and it’s as he rushes up the stairs to the office, reading Hannibal’s name and professional title, *Clinical Psychiatrist,* on the brass plaque, that he has a sudden jolt of fear run through him.

Am I still Will Graham? Or is it Will Lecter, now? Can I keep using my own surname?

He pauses before the door, rolling the tightness from his shoulders shoving the intrusive thoughts to the back of his mind, and then walks inside.

‘Sorry, traffic was hell.’

Hannibal, of course, can sense something is wrong and ignores both the apology and the tardiness. He rises from his desk, impeccably dressed in a brown check suit and burnt orange shirt, with matching blue paisley tie and pocket handkerchief, and strides over to take his mate by the arms.

‘Are you alright?’ he asks, trying to look into Will’s eyes. His Omega is trembling, and not just from rushing here; something has upset him. ‘What are you thinking?’

Will tries to shrug him off, checking off details of his appearance as a coping mechanism for forgetting the truth of his panic.

He should be more scared of losing his identity. Of becoming nothing more than Hannibal’s mate, but he isn’t, and *that’s* what terrifies him.

‘I’m fine,’ he mutters, rolling his eyes when Hannibal openly scoffs at his lie. ‘I just…’ He huffs, and scrubs at the stubble on his cheeks. ‘Alana suspects something,’ he says, throwing out the bait to distract the other man. ‘Jack asked her to help profile the killer; she thinks it’s a mated pair, recently Bonded.’

‘She always was top of her class,’ Hannibal says, stepping back to give Will some space but his eyes still narrowed at the deflection. He takes Will’s coat and decides to accept it, for now. ‘Does it upset you to know she grows suspicious of you?’

‘Not just me,’ Will replies, walking to his chair and all but throwing himself down into the leather cushions. ‘I don’t think she trusts either of us, anymore.’ He lapses into brooding silence, and Hannibal takes a moment to hang the coat beside his own and then lock the office door. He pours them each a glass of water and joins him, sitting in the chair opposite.

‘Every creative act has its destructive consequence, Will.’ He recalls the cemetery tableau, wishing he could have been there to witness, firsthand, Will’s surprise and pleasure at the offering. ‘The Hindu god, Shiva, is simultaneous destroyer and creator. Who you were yesterday is laid waste to give rise to who you are today.’

Will’s shoulders quiver. Tension thrums through his veins like an electric charge. Hannibal can see that his beloved is touched by the gift, by its symbolism, but repulsed by his own gratitude, and is now taking refuge in the simplicity of anger.

‘How many lies have had to be sanctified*?’* the Omega muses. ‘How many consciences devastated?’

‘As many as were necessary,’ Hannibal replies, and Will can feel the rush of love, of *devotion*, through their bond.

It’s you, Will. It’s only ever been you.

His breath catches. He can’t tell where he ends and Hannibal begins. The edges of himself and the other man have begun to blur… Bleeding into each other with every kiss, every kill.

‘You sacrificed Abigail,’ he whispers, and it’s like he’s watching himself; a stronger, colder version, tilt his head as he considers the accusation. ‘You cared about her,’ Will continues, ‘as much as I did.’

‘Maybe more,’ Hannibal says, his throat unbearably tight. He watches himself in Will’s eyes; his demeanor, and wonders how much of the Omega he has taken into his own behavior. His

eyes flicker red. ‘But, then, how much has God sacrificed?’

The moment ends, and Will curls his upper lip, eyes flashing gold.

‘What god do *you* pray to?’

‘I don’t pray,’ Hannibal says simply. ‘I’ve not been bothered by any considerations of deity, other than to recognize how my own modest actions *pale* beside those of God.’

‘I prayed,’ Will admits, grief leeching the warmth from his eyes, leaving them a flat blue. He swallows, hating how vulnerable Hannibal makes him. ‘… That I would see Abigail again.’

‘Well,’ Hannibal reasons, ‘your prayer did not go entirely unanswered. You saw part of her.’

Hatred and disgust pass across Will’s face, too fast for him to notice and quash them, and Hannibal is surprised by the guilt he feels at such a cruel jest.

‘Will,’ he says, speaking softly but with passion, *needing* his mate to hear him. ‘Should the universe contract… Should time reverse and teacups come together… A place *could* be made for Abigail in your world.’

We could be a family, Will. All of us. Together.

Will presses his lips together and shakes his head, gulping back tears.

‘What place would *that* be?’ he whispers, raw before his mate. Hannibal has no intention of further wounding him; the Omega’s pain gives him strength, and Hannibal will foster that in him. For his own good.

‘You’ve lost a child, Will.’ His eyes gleam in the low light. ‘It seems you’re likely to gain another, in addition to our own.’

Will frowns, and then huffs when he realizes what Hannibal is suggesting. Replace Abigail with a son or daughter of their making… Fill the memory of her with new ones from their baby.

A new toy, for the one that was broken. It is a child’s logic.

Shadows across the walls, climbing ever higher as a monstrous creation blots out the sun. The Goddess Shiva, made not from the burnt and withered remains of Freddie Lounds and fellow corpses, but the antlered demon. It extends its arms, white eyes blank and blind to the cruelty of its form.

‘God is beyond measure in wanton malice,’ Hannibal says, and he looks with Will at the creature born of his mate’s imagination. At death, given form. ‘And *matchless* in his irony.’

‘You’re not God,’ Will murmurs, eliciting a grin from the other man.

‘No,’ Hannibal agrees. ‘And I make no claim to be.’

‘Yet you possess so many of His traits,’ Will says, turning away from the watching wendigo. ‘Were you born like this? Or did something happen to you?’

Hannibal tilts his head, maroon eyes gleaming.

‘I believe we are all born with the potential for greatness,’ he says, idly brushing a crease from his suit. ‘Though, for me, I noticed a marked change after the death of my sister.’

Will is silent for a moment, weighing his words.

‘When I profiled the Chesapeake Ripper, I postulated a traumatic event in his childhood. Something that shaped him; *changed* him. In return, he changed others. Disconnected from the world, and wore a perfectly tailored person suit to fit in with his victims.’

‘Frederick Chilton is the Chesapeake Ripper,’ Hannibal says, quietly and deliberately. To his relief, Will allows it, nodding his acquiescence.

‘Many psychopaths share similar traits,’ he replies, smirking when irritation creases Hannibal’s brow. ‘Narcissism,’ he continues, pointing out the anger at being considered the same as others. ‘A lack of emotional maturity…’

‘Another common trait is an inability to abide by the law,’ Hannibal says, reminding Will of his subterfuge in the FBI. ‘And engaging in dangerous, impulsive behavior.’

‘Like hunting serial killers,’ Will murmurs. ‘Or digging up the corpse of a newly murdered journalist to create a Courtship gift.’ He sighs, and rubs his fingertips together. ‘I want to keep my surname,’ he says, knowing it’s a rapid change of topic but unable to keep from blurting it out. ‘And I want the baby to keep it… Even if we hyphenate.’

‘Graham-Lecter does have a pleasant ring to it,’ Hannibal says, smiling when Will looks surprised. His beloved has yet to accept how truly special he is; how *much* Hannibal would sacrifice for him. ‘I would be honored to share your name with you.’

‘I…’ Will stares at him, at his monster, his mate, at the *Alpha* willing to take on his Omegan surname… Another purr rises, and he can’t keep it from rattling deep in his throat. ‘Thank you.’

I love you. I wish I didn’t. But I do, no matter what.

***

As much as he would have liked it to be, Will’s session is not the last of his day. Hannibal bids his mate farewell, writes up the notes from their discussion and then opens the door at precisely 4pm to Mason Verger.

The billionaire strolls into the room, something more forced in his swagger this time.

You believe me about the pregnancy. Hannibal smirks to himself at the thought, though he is careful to hide his glee from the Beta.

Mason slouches in the patient armchair, his hair gelled into typical disarray but mocha suit pristine. It is all an illusion; even when he starts mumbling to himself, pretending to forget why he's here, and who he is with.

'No, no… Cancel *that* one…' He sniffs a laugh; he is flicking through his memories, choosing which to share with Dr Lecter.

Hannibal watches in mild disbelief, curious as to just *how* far Mason will push his self-proclaimed madness act.

Mason smacks his lips and grins, holding up a finger as he settles on a choice.

'I remember walking the swine fairs with my father,' he says, proclaiming it as some great honor. 'Looking over the competition… Papa's little silver knife, ever ready to slip out of his waistcoat and *stick* it into the back of a pig – to check the depth of fat.' He grins, blue eyes manic and a growing bulge in his pants at the memory of the creatures' pain.

What a vile, uncouth man, Hannibal thinks. Aloud, he merely states,

'Your education was an odd one.'

Mason bursts out laughing, and Hannibal chuckles with him, because Mason doesn't even realize how much of a pig he himself is. How ready for slaughter he is…

'Oh, those were *good*, *funny* times,' Mason says, sobering a little. 'Papa would stab 4H show pigs, who thought everyone was their friend – scrubbed in milk and baby powder… Such coddled little things…' He mimes punching a little knife down into their backs, piercing the skin and bruising their sensitive flesh.

Hannibal considers the look of bitter hatred on Mason's face, just for a moment, as he lashes out. A child's resentful anger, at never being good enough. Never being special enough.

'Part of a show pig's consideration is its happiness,' he says. 'Much like an Omega's.'

The barb sticks, and Mason's face twists in ugly hate at the reminder of his sister's specialness.

'If we were *truly* considerate of a pig's happiness, we wouldn't *eat* them.'

'What about Margot's happiness?' Hannibal asks, and Mason rolls his eyes.

'Papa taught me how to stick the knife in only as deep as necessary,' he says. 'To test the *thickness* of her skin.'

Hannibal feels his eyes itch as red bleeds into his irises; a biological response to such blatant admission of an Omega's abuse.

'You miscalculated.' He tilts his head. 'Struck a nerve.'

Just as I am doing with you.

‘Margot would *love* to stick a knife into me,’ Mason snarls. ‘And it wouldn’t be to test the thickness of my skin.’

‘She tried to kill you once already,’ Hannibal agrees, but Mason merely scoffs.

‘“To a male or Alphan heir”,’ he says, removing his glasses to rub his eyes. ‘“Confirmed as my descendent”. It’s a very clever loophole she’s found in Papa’s will.’ The glasses are back on, and he rolls his eyes again. ‘*Clearly* he did not take into account how *resourceful* she is.’

‘Neither did you,’ Hannibal says, but Mason shakes his head.

‘I can be resourceful, too.’ He narrows his eyes at Dr Lecter, despising the Alpha his calm demeanor. How he would *love* to stick a knife into *his* back, to test the thickness of his skin… ‘If she’s *not* yet pregnant, she will be. Margot’s very tenacious that way. And *everybody* knows that the likelihood of an Alphan progeny doubles when one parent is an Omega.’

‘Almost certainly, if both are,’ Hannibal replies, relishing the growing panic in Mason’s eyes. ‘This child would be a Verger. You would have an Alphan heir to carry on the family name… To carry on *your* name.’

Once you’re no longer around.

‘I’d have an heir,’ Mason says, ‘only if I *die*.’

Hannibal doesn’t reply. He doesn’t need to.

There are many ways to slaughter a pig, after all.

***

‘Buster, Rudy, in!’ Will calls, lowering his voice as the line clicks on the other end of the phone.

‘Hello, Will,’ Hannibal says, warm and welcoming, as though they hadn’t seen each other merely hours before. ‘Is everything alright?’

‘I’m making dinner,’ Will says, propping the phone on his shoulder as he shuts the garden door and returns to the kitchen island to finish chopping bell peppers. ‘What time will you be home?’

‘I’m just writing up my notes,’ Hannibal says, smiling at the idea of his mate in the townhouse kitchen, an apron around his waist, cooking a meal ready for when he arrives. It is every Alpha’s dream…

A knock at the door interrupts him, and he frowns.

‘One moment,’ he murmurs, muting the speaker as he rises to attend to his visitor.

He hides his irritation behind a charming smile when he opens the door to see none other than Alana Bloom on his threshold, her cheeks flushed from the cold, her eyes bright with

nerves.

‘Alana, what a pleasant surprise.’ He steps back and extends an arm. ‘To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?’

Alana shrugs, and hands him her coat when he offers to take it. She walks around the office, rubbing her hands together and straightening out her curls.

‘I, er… Could do with some friendly advice,’ she says, glancing back at the Alpha when he closes the door. ‘Do you have a moment?’

‘Of course.’ Hannibal returns to his desk, where his suit jacket hangs over the back of his chair, waiting for him to slip it on and leave for his house and his mate, and unmutes the phone. ‘I’ll call you back. I have a guest. An old friend, in need of good company.’

‘Alana?’ Will asks, growing very still in the kitchen, the knife frozen over the chopping board. When Hannibal hums his confirmation, he lowers the blade for fear of dropping it. ‘Be careful,’ he warns, wiping his hands on his apron. ‘Don’t do anything rash.’

‘Never,’ Hannibal promises, and then hangs up. He returns the phone to the cradle and moves towards his drinks cabinet. ‘Would you like a drink?’

‘That was Will?’ Alana asks, something sharp in her tone making Hannibal pause and hide a grin. He fetches two small wine glasses – he has no intention of spending long with her, after all – and bends to pull an open bottle of Chardonnay from the fridge.

‘It was,’ he says, filling each glass to precisely halfway. ‘He’s at home; making dinner.’

We all but live together, now.

Alana flinches at the insult, the callous reminder of her place as mistress in the Alpha’s life, and clenches her teeth as she accepts the glass from her former mentor. Her former friend.

‘It’s good you have someone,’ she says carefully, arranging her black pencil skirt as she sits down on the edge of the chaise lounge. ‘You’re always tense after a day with patients.’

‘One observes only things which are already on the mind,’ Hannibal replies, brushing aside her overt attempts to define their topic of conversation. He sighs and sits down beside her, reminding himself that she is only human, after all; no match for the greatness that is the result of his true union with Will. ‘What’s on your mind?’ he asks gently, gazing at the taut, trembling Beta.

Alana’s eyes sparkle with unshed tears, and she releases a long, slow breath as she searches for the right words.

‘I’m feeling pressure to believe something I don’t trust, and that pressure…’ She sighs again. ‘Is making me paranoid.’

I don’t know who anyone is anymore. You, Will… Jack? Are any of you telling me the truth? Or are you all blind to what’s happening? Am I seeing what I’m seeing?

Hannibal considers her statement, her near-unshakeable faith in Will's goodness, and takes a deep scent of his wine before sipping it. Crisp and sweet; the perfect antidote to Alana's cloying perfume.

'Who's pressuring you?' he asks, even though he already knows the answer. He's curious if Alana will answer truthfully.

After a moment's pause, she does.

'Will.'

Hannibal lets the taste of the wine sit on his tongue, giving the appearance of thinking about the Omega's silent presence between them. So much has happened; but Will is always the one constant in their lives.

'We'll never really be alone, will we?' he asks quietly. 'He'll always be in the room.'

'He's your mate,' Alana replies, her voice wobbling. 'You're bonded to each other… You could be halfway across the globe and he'd know where to find you.' She swallows, and then looks harder at the Alpha's chiseled face, willing him to turn and face her, to let her see into his eyes and test the honesty of his answer as she asks, 'Do you feel like you're helping him? Making progress?'

Please… I need to know if it's just me or if you've noticed something dark growing inside him, too.

Hannibal lifts one shoulder in a small shrug.

'Will is finally finding himself,' he says. 'He's getting better.'

No…

Panic makes Alana speak without thinking.

'He doesn't *seem* to be getting better.'

Hannibal pauses at the insult. When he looks at her, his eyes snap fire and a dangerous smile pulls on his lips.

'Are you questioning my therapy?' he warns, playful enough that it is not an overt threat, but still cool.

The Beta smiles an apology, her cheeks flushing pink at the rebuke, and then her mouth pulls down and her gaze grows distant.

'I'm questioning everything,' she admits. 'It's all… *blurry* and subjective.' She takes a shuddering breath and brushes tears from her lashes, her fingers trembling. 'I feel empty,' she whispers. 'Like I've given blood.'

Nothing is what it seems. Nobody is who they say they are.

Hannibal sets his glass aside and reaches for her hand, holding it in his own, broader palm. With his other, he brushes back her hair and squeezes her shoulder; an intimate gesture that is more than mere friendship.

'Alana,' he says gently, 'you've given more than blood.'

You've given yourself, to me; body and mind.

As Alana gives him a crooked smile, Hannibal drops both hands back to hers, bending to kiss her knuckles. He brushes his lips over the soft skin, inhaling the scent of her. But there is something else there, too; amidst the perfumed hand lotion, cheap soap from a café bathroom and Alana's unique, Betan scent, there is something sharp… Metallic…

A bullet can leave the chamber of a revolver at over one thousand feet per second… As it exits, the casing emits miniscule grains of powder…

Abandoning her hand, Hannibal reaches again for Alana's neck, cupping the back of it and pulling her in. His lips meet hers, but there is nothing sexual in the kiss; he is bidding her farewell, as both a friend and someone in his life. And, as they kiss, he notes the new tension in her; the resistance to his touch.

You no longer trust me.

It was only a matter of time, of course. Will is the only person to truly see him, and accept him for all that he is.

When they break apart, Alana forces herself to keep looking into Hannibal's face; the face of a man she once thought she loved.

Have I ever really known you?

Hannibal considers her with barely-concealed contempt.

'Have you been firing a gun?' he asks, testing her honesty once more.

Alana swallows but, to her credit, she doesn't look away.

'Told you I was feeling paranoid,' she says, and then leans in to kiss him again. Hannibal allows it, but doesn't engage, and keeps his eyes open. Alana's ploy is an obvious one; she is attempting to use sex as a diversion.

After a moment, the Beta lets it end, and sits back with a rueful smile and another blush.

'Guess it was fun while it lasted,' she mumbles, taking a large gulp of wine with which to swallow her grief. 'Somehow, I always fall for the wrong guy.'

'Perhaps you should return to women,' Hannibal replies, and Alana rolls her eyes, trying to remember how it felt to be with him when she wasn't scared. Had he always been this callous?

Has Will changed you that much, or am I just seeing you now for who you really are?

'Nothing stays the same, does it?' she asks quietly, rolling the glass between her palms, her stomach swarming with nervous anticipation. 'And once something changes, we can never go back to the way things were.'

I don't think I can ever trust you again…

Hannibal tilts his head, watching her closely. There is so much Alana wants to say, but she hasn't the courage. She doesn't trust her own judgment, not after believing the worst of Will…

'Hardship can often reveal the truth of ourselves,' he says, taking Alana's glass from her and helping her to her feet. 'When faced with irrevocable evidence, we are forced to question our own beliefs and assumptions.'

'It's painful,' Alana confesses, hanging on to Hannibal's hands like a child clinging to its mother's skirts. 'To be so vulnerable.'

'It's how we evolve,' Hannibal replies, placing one last kiss to her fingertips. 'We adapt or we die.'

And I doubt, my dear, that you can adapt to the truth.

***

Will is waiting by the front door when he returns home.

'What did she say?' he demands, barely allowing Hannibal to cross the threshold before crowding close to him, needing the security of his scent and touch to soothe him.

Hannibal almost purrs at the success of his conditioning, but now is not the time. He gives Will a hug and nuzzles his curls, tasting the chili and tomato sauce of their dinner, fresh bread, dogs and *Will*; wildfire and blood, smoke and sugar.

'You've scared her,' he murmurs, echoing old words spoken when Will was a fugitive, and sought out one of the few people he thought he could trust. 'She doubts us both.'

'I'm just being honest,' Will replies, burying his head deeper into Hannibal's shoulder. 'She has to know the truth.'

She has to doubt us both, so that she'll doubt you.

'What truth?' Hannibal asks, dropping a trail of kisses along Will's hairline, coaxing the Omega to lift his face and allow access to his lips. 'What do you want her to know?'

'That you're dangerous,' Will replies, whispering the words into Hannibal's mouth. 'That *we're* dangerous.'

That you're the Ripper.

Hannibal kisses him, slowly and tenderly, but his mind is whirring. Will wants Alana to know about them; their true natures and all that comes with it. But the Beta is good, and she will not rest until they are brought to justice.

‘Do you want to leave Baltimore?’ he asks, carding his hands through Will’s hair when they finally part. ‘Move somewhere else with the baby?’

Will frowns, his eyes a beautiful blend of sapphire and gold.

‘I… don’t know,’ he admits, basking in the scalp massage his Alpha is treating him to. ‘I haven’t really thought about it.’

‘Italy is wonderful,’ Hannibal says, following the curve of Will’s neck to work on the knots in his shoulders. ‘Florence, Venice… Even Rome.’

‘I spent so long moving around when I was a child,’ Will says, turning around and lowering his head to give Hannibal unfettered access to his nape, ‘I was almost resistant to the idea of moving again once I bought the house in Wolf Trap.’

‘“Was”?’ Hannibal asks, pressing a gentle kiss to the burning skin at Will’s hairline, a breath shy of the first ridge of his crest. Will tenses and then relaxes, resistance flowing out of him like smoke.

‘I’m not sure I could stay there,’ he says, trying hard to maintain their conversation. ‘If you went away… I’d want to be with you.’

I wouldn’t be, but I’d always want to be. I’d visit you in prison and I’d miss you, but it would be the right thing to do.

‘We shall have to find a place of our own, then,’ Hannibal murmurs, digging his thumbs deep between the muscles of Will’s shoulders and forcing the tightness away. ‘A fresh start, for all of us.’

‘Jack will hunt us,’ Will whispers, images flickering behind closed eyelids. Hannibal caught, Hannibal chained, Hannibal in the same cell he’d lived in… Hannibal free, and Jack’s cooling corpse before them…

I know who I am.

‘Let him,’ Hannibal growls, and Will shivers, desire pooling in his belly. He reaches up, encouraging Hannibal to wrap his arms around him, tilting his head back to bare his throat when the Alpha obliges.

‘There’s nowhere we could run where we’d be safe,’ he argues, clutching tight to Hannibal’s forearms. ‘Nowhere our *child* could be safe.’

‘You underestimate me,’ Hannibal replies, and presses a kiss to Will’s cheek. ‘Do you think I haven’t planned for a quick escape, if ever I needed to?’

Good to know, Will thinks, though unease still coils in his gut. Aloud, he merely says,

‘Do those same plans include a pregnant Omega or a newborn?’

‘Every plan can be adjusted,’ Hannibal says, with enough certainty that Will believes him. He sighs, wishing he didn’t feel so conflicted, and sinks into the embrace, content for now to simply be held. They talk no further of escape plans, and, after a while, Hannibal stirs, his stomach rumbling.

‘Shall I set the table?’ he asks, disengaging from the hug to remove his coat. He hangs it beside Will’s and follows the smaller man through to the dining room, the scent of dinner growing stronger the closer they get to the kitchen.

‘No peacock feathers,’ Will warns, leaving Hannibal to his fastidious place settings as he returns to check the gumbo. ‘And no wine for me; I bought myself some alcohol-free beer.’

‘That sounds perfectly vile,’ Hannibal says sweetly, earning himself a juvenile finger gesture in response. His laughter follows Will into the kitchen, and the Omega pinches the bridge of his nose, his thoughts racing.

He needs to play this carefully. Alana’s worried; very worried if she’s confronted Hannibal directly. That’s good. She suspects him of murder, and of Hannibal’s involvement in the tableaus. That’s also good. But if she moves too fast, or goes to anyone other than Jack with her suspicions…

I’m a good fisherman.

Hannibal loves him. He loves Hannibal. But Hannibal is a killer. The Chesapeake Ripper. He’s too dangerous to be allowed to roam free.

I don’t want him dead. Just punished for what he’s done.

His chest aches at the idea of seeing his Alpha behind bars, but his gut throbs with vicious joy. After all, doing bad things to bad people makes him feel good.

It will feel good to see Hannibal get the justice he deserves.

‘Will?’

Hannibal’s voice by his ear makes him jump, and Will realizes his Alpha has snuck up behind him. At the same time, the acrid stench of burning food makes him swear. He’d been so engrossed in thoughts of the hunt, of luring Hannibal out into the open, he’d almost ruined dinner.

‘I’ve got it,’ he mutters, grabbing for the pan to pull it from the heat. He forgets to use a towel and yelps at the flash of pain when his skin sticks to the hot metal.

‘You’re shaking,’ Hannibal says, swiftly removing the pot from the hob and turning off the gas. He wraps Will in his arms, holding him close, and nuzzles his forehead. ‘You smell of fear, and arousal.’

‘And you smell hungry,’ Will mumbles, pushing the Alpha away from him. ‘I’m fine; I’m just…’ He blows out his breath and rubs a hand over his face. ‘It’s unnerving.’

‘You’ve spent so much of your life hiding who you truly are,’ Hannibal says, stroking up and down Will’s back. ‘It must be unnerving to finally show those you care about what you’re capable of.’

Will shivers, both at the words and the touch. He leans into the embrace, wishing it could be as simple as Hannibal says. But it isn’t. And it never will be.

I can’t be what you want. But I don’t know if I can go back, either. I don’t know if I want to go back. And that’s what terrifies me.

***

Margot Verger packs two suitcases in the middle of the night, waits until the estate is silent and dark, and then hurries to her car. Mason made another threat at dinner, joking about impregnating her himself to provide an heir.

She can’t wait another second.

Driving down the country roads, Margot’s belly twists into knots. She grips the steering wheel tight enough to make the leather creak and peers ahead for any ice or animals. The last thing she needs is the risk of an accident, when she’s just made her escape.

She checks the rearview mirror, her heart pounding fit to burst. Mason will come after her, as soon as he realizes she’s gone. He’ll hunt her down like a dog and drag her back in chains, and there’s nothing anyone can do to stop him. The law, after all, would be on his side.

Her only hope it hiding – she’ll go to Will’s first, and then south until the baby is born.

Without its headlights on, she has no way of seeing the Jeep barreling towards her from a side road. It smashes into the side of her Jaguar and time stops. Glass shatters, raining shards down on her. Margot’s seatbelt snaps tight, ripping through her skin and bruising her collarbone. Tires squeal, the smell of burned rubber scorching her nostrils, and then her head slams into the steering wheel, splitting her lip before she’s whipped back.

Her car judders to a stop, the metal of the door crushing up against her leg where the bull-bars on the other vehicle have dented it.

The Jeep’s headlights switch on, blinding her, and Margot tires to pretend the dampness on her cheeks is from stinging eyes, not tears.

It is Carlo, the Italian Alpha who works for Mason, that steps from the car. As he approaches, staring down into her bruised and bleeding face, his own expression grim, Margot knows the pain has only just begun.

***

She wakes to the feeling of a cold table beneath her back, the blip of a heart monitor and the smell of antiseptic.

Margot blinks, trying to clear her fuzzy vision. She's been drugged; her mouth tastes like bleach and her tongue is fuzzy. Why…? Where…?

Memories of the crash come back, swift and brutal. Carlo, ramming her car off the road. Carlo, approaching her as she sat, trapped in the driver's seat of her ruined Jaguar… Carlo, removing the cap from a syringe and plunging it into her neck…

A new face appears above her, upside down and hidden behind a surgical mask, but still terrifyingly recognizable.

Mason pulls on a glove, making the latex snap against his skin. His private surgical team wear crimson gowns and paper caps, and Mason's skin appears unnaturally pale in his new outfit. His glasses shine in the light of a dozen bulbs overhead, and Margot tracks them with her golden eyes; the only part of her body she can move.

A crest brace digs into the nape of her neck, cruelly tight to paralyze her despite her unblemished skin. There's a drip in her arm, as well; a sedative, if the heavy feeling weighing her own is any indication.

Trapped. Helpless. Vulnerable.

Margot can't even panic; the brace has been positioned to keep her calm and pliant. All she can do is breathe and stare straight up at the ceiling when Mason straddles the chair set just behind his sister's head.

'Poor Margot,' he muses, stroking her tangled hair and then resting his elbow next to her bruised shoulder. 'You just *can't* win.'

He sighs, and removes the surgical mask, letting it hang around his neck. Leans in so that his lips leave spit smeared on Margot's ear as he continues,

'I have to *remove* this temptation.'

No… No, no, please, no…

Margot's brain spins with the thought, fighting uselessly against the truth of her situation. Mason gets up again and lean across from the side, filling the Omega's vision with his face.

'They're going to find something wrong with your lady parts, Margot,' he says. Grins. 'Or so the *record* will state.'

Margot feels a tear roll, unbidden, down her cheek. It drips into the shell of her ear, tickling her, but she can't even shiver.

'The doctor will advise me that it's *best*… if they take *everything*.' Mason finishes on a gleeful whisper, and Margot is certain she can feel a telltale hardness nudging her hand on the side of the table.

He's going to kill my baby. He's going to kill my baby and take my womb, so I can never make another one.

She'll never bear children.

More tears well and fall. She can't stop them. It's over. It was all for nothing. She'll never have a baby, she'll never be free or safe from Mason.

'The only person you'll be celebrating Mother's Day with,' Mason adds, 'is *me*.' He uses a little square of blotter paper to soak up Margot's tear, his erection weeping at the idea of tasting her pain and fear, and then drops a swift kiss onto her forehead.

He looks round, grinning to the waiting surgeon, and gives the nod to go.

Margot's breath gets shallower, the only physical indication of her terror at what it about to come, and the anesthesiologist approaches with a gas mask. They don't speak to her; she might as well be a cadaver for all they care about her, and Margot holds her breath.

Unconsciousness is inevitable, though. She takes a breath, and then another, and the world slips away, taking with it her hopes for survival.

Mason will never let me go. He'll own me and hurt me until the day I die.

She prays she never wakes up.

***

After a sleepless night, Alana goes to Quantico to confront Jack. She calls ahead during the journey and makes an appointment to see him. When she arrives, she goes straight up to his office and removes her coat, hanging it beside his on the stand.

'What can I help you with?' Jack asks, watching her from behind his desk. He is reclining in his chair, legs crossed at the knee, hands clasped in his lap and a smug gleam to his eyes.

Fucking Alphas, Alana thinks, but there's no fire to it. She's too scared to be angry. Whatever is happening, it's going to kill them all.

'The most terrifying thing in the world can be a lucid moment,' she says, her voice thick with grief. 'What are you up to?'

Jack frowns.

'I'm not sure I know what you're talking about, Dr Bloom.'

Alana approaches the desk and sits down in one of the chairs across from him.

'I think you know,' she replies, pinning him with icy blue eyes. 'You're not fooling me, Jack.'

'I'm not trying to fool you,' Jack replies, and Alana bares her teeth.

‘You’re *lying!’* She waits a beat, to check that Jack isn’t going to argue again. When the Alpha merely thins his lips and stares at her, she continues, ‘You’re *all* lying. Will. Hannibal. You’re lying to each other and *they’re* lying to *you*.’

Jack turns to face her, hands now clasped on the desk separating them.

‘Tell me what you believe is happening,’ he says, dark eyes fixed on her face. Alana scoffs.

‘What do *I* believe? What do *you* believe?’ She leans forwards. ‘Do you believe Will killed Freddie Lounds?’

Jack shakes his head.

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Do you think Dr Chilton’s the Chesapeake Ripper?’ Alana demands, and Jack sighs.

‘There was overwhelming evidence –’ he begins, but Alana’s shout interrupts him.

‘Stop *lying*, Jack!’ She comes back to herself, realizing she’s leant across the desk with her hands on the wood, half out of her seat with rage. As she sits down, two tears roll down her cheeks. ‘You think you’ve moved your pieces around so cleverly,’ she continues, quiet now, her voice thick.

Jack narrows his eyes, considering her down the length of his nose.

‘What’s *changed*, Alana?’ he asks. She was, after all, Hannibal’s most avid supporter, furious when Jack suspected him of being the Ripper.

Alana swallows, but it does nothing to disperse the lump in her throat.

‘I have no confidence that I know Hannibal Lecter anymore,’ she confesses. She wets her lips, her tongue too hot on the dry surface. ‘And even with as much as you know, or *think* you know, about Hannibal… you don’t know him either.’ When Jack remains silent, eyes on the papers before him, Alana growls. ‘And you *don’t* know *Will*.’

You don’t know what he’s capable of.

Another tear falls, but Alana ignores it, her bloodshot eyes fixed on the Alpha’s face.

‘You are going to *lose*, Jack!’ Another sigh, exhaustion creeping up on her. The hopelessness of the situation… Hannibal’s cold, callous judgments… Will’s sneer… She pushes back her hair and wipes her cheeks. ‘If you haven’t lost already.’

Jack nods, almost to himself. He weighs his choices, thinking hard about the woman before him. Alana is volatile, but she is also smart, and she won’t stop now that she suspects the truth.

He taps his fingers on the desk and then pushes up from his chair.

‘I want you to come with me,’ he says, leading the way from his office. Alana frowns, rising to follow him, and they make their way through the halls of Quantico, up two floors and into the secure unit; the meeting rooms and apartments they keep secret for at-risk informants.

Jack slows outside a glass door, tugging it towards him with a hiss of sanitized air. It is a briefing room, an antechamber to the bedsit beyond, and, as Alana follows him inside, she realizes they are not in there alone.

Freddie Lounds, dressed for mourning in a black zebra-print dress and dark blazer, rises from behind the table, her gaze serene.

Alana stops, her heart skipping a beat and her stomach dropping to the floor.

Freddie… is alive?

She’s *alive*… Will didn’t kill her…

It was a lie? A trick?

To lure Hannibal into confessing the truth…

The redhaired Alpha smiles, her blue eyes glittering.

‘So. How was my funeral?’

***

It isn’t until noon the following day, after Margot has failed to show for her appointment with Dr Lecter, that he determines where she is. Once he knows, he calls Will.

‘Margot has been in an accident,’ he says, by way of greeting. Will is silent on the other end of the phone, and then,

‘*Where?*’

***

They meet at the private clinic. Will is a shadow at Hannibal’s side, his face perfectly blank but black fire raging in his eyes. The Omegan Specialists know better than to approach him, though the more daring ones give Hannibal the odd sympathetic look.

What a difficult mate. You poor, tolerant Alpha.

They take the elevator in stony silence. Hannibal is careful to keep his glee in check; he doesn’t want Will knowing he planned this. Will’s fury batters against him; a stormy sea against the cliffs. It is glorious – wild and dangerous, thirsty for blood.

Mason will die for this. Will is going to make sure of it.

That’s my boy. Kill him. For me. For us.

Margot is in room 317. Hannibal leaves Will to enter alone, going to the nurse's station to sign them in.

A heart monitor beeps in the background. The room is large, and tastefully decorated. Ferns and big windows, soft wood and muted colors to soothe the patients as they recover.

Margot is unconscious. Her face is bruised and swollen, angry cuts still lurid red where glass has split her skin. She has been braced; Will can see the metal digging into the tender nerves of her neck, and bile rises in his throat at the memory of Dr Chilton bracing him for his physical exam.

He picks up the chart clipped to the end of the bed, reading the notes to distract himself.

Omega. Unbonded. Car accident. Hysterectomy due to internal bleeding.

The baby is dead. His and Margot's baby. The one she tricked him into helping her to conceive. Mason has engineered a way to take it away from them.

Mason killed my child.

Hannibal returns, but he knows better than to speak. He simply looks at Margot, and then turns to Will. He is waiting; whatever Will chooses to do, he will support.

Will knows he wants him to kill Mason. *He* wants to kill Mason.

He has a gun in the car.

Will looks to his Alpha, blood promised in his golden eyes, and then he leaves.

Mason killed my child.

***

It doesn't take long to get to the Verger estate. Will dumps his car along the service road and jogs through the snow, slowing only when he comes into sight of the stables. Middle Eastern music blares from somewhere inside, and Will uses the sound to mask the crunch of his boots when he spots a surly Alpha walking across the yard.

He attacks from the side, barreling straight into him and sending him sprawling. Before the Italian can get to his feet, spitting snow from his mouth and reaching for a gun, Will has already slugged him over the back of the head with the handle of his gun. The man slumps in a heap of snow, hat upended several feet away and a thin trickle of blood at his temple.

Will barely stops to check that he's unconscious before he's sprinting towards the barn. He follows the wailing music; a bastardization of traditional songs, and rips the plug from its socket.

Silence descends.

High above the pig pen, watching his hogs devour Margot's womb, Mason Verger opens his eyes as his soundtrack is paused.

'Carlo?' he calls, wondering why the Sard would stop the music. It doesn't really matter; this way, he can hear the squelch of tissue being shredded. Time to add the fetus to the mix. 'Carlo, I don't think they've had enough to –'

He peers around the wing of his armchair, hearing the measured footsteps of someone approaching. When he sees a stranger, slight, curly haired, golden eyes – *Omega* – he gets up. Squints at the other man – if he even counts as a man – and wraps his fur coat around him.

'You must be the baby-daddy,' he says. Grins and peers inside his pockets. 'Excuse me if I don't offer you a cigar.'

Will looks Mason Verger up and down. A scrawny little Beta, with hair styled to look mad, a pudgy face and clothes too refined for the slug that he is.

You killed my child.

He brings his arm back and punches him, hard. Throws his weight into it and whips Mason's head to the side, making him stagger.

Pain shoots across Mason's skull and his eyes water. He straightens, glaring at the Omega who just *hit* him, the Omega who is now clenching his teeth and staring off to the side, perhaps debating whether to hit him again.

You don't have the right.

He wipes the blood from his nostrils, the cartilage already swelling. It might even be broken. He can't tell. He licks his fingers, tasting copper and leather, and then laughs, baring red-stained teeth at the insolent brat before him.

'Haha! I'm gonna feed you to my pigs! Carlo!'

He's still shouting for the Sard when Will drags him by the lapels to the very edge of the balcony, and he whoops with manic laughter as his heels hit thin air. He's hanging over the pig pen, the hungry boars clammering beneath him, waiting for their next meal.

Grabbing the Omega's coat, Mason flails wildly – if he's going to fall, he's damn well making sure the pathetic excuse for a man before him is coming, too.

Won't be such a pretty thing when my pigs are done with your face.

Panting now from rage and the effort of holding the struggling Beta over the edge of the deck, Will braces with his back and leans closer to Mason's sweaty face.

'You think it was *Margot's* idea to have an Alphan heir?' he hissed. 'You think it was *your* idea to take it from her?'

Mason considers, staring up at the rafters of the barn. Okay… It makes sense… Who *is* this guy?

‘My idea,’ Will finishes, his arms shaking from the strain. ‘To come here and *kill* you?’ He uses the pain shooting down his spine to ground him, focus him, and he feels when his eyes blaze gold. ‘The *only* thing you, your sister and I have in common is the *same psychiatrist*.’

Jerking Mason towards him, he shoves him to the side and sends the Beta sprawling. Grabs the gun from his coat pocket before the other man can get to his feet so that, when Mason rounds on him, ready to tackle him and throw him down to the swine, he is met with the cold muzzle of a revolver against his forehead.

Will glares at the next round of cackling laughter. Mason is repugnant, but that doesn’t mean *Will* should be the one to kill him.

‘If Dr Lecter had his druthers,’ he says, finger itching to pull the trigger, ‘you’d be wrapped around a bullet. Right now.’

Mason narrows his eyes, daring him to make the choice. When the Omega uncocks the gun, bringing it back to his side and releasing him, he tilts his head in confusion.

Will’s eyes glitter. It’s time for a game of his own.

‘*Dr Lecter* is the one you want to be feeding to your pigs.’

Tome-wan

Chapter Summary

Will draws Hannibal into a game of his own design, informing his Alpha of his ongoing desire to kill him. Jack warns Will against getting too drawn into the deceit, as his mutilation of Randall Tier goes beyond ‘self-defense’. Meanwhile, he finds Dr Du Maurier, and brings her back to be interviewed about Hannibal Lecter.

Mason captures Hannibal.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone. Wow, first of all, I want to apologise for taking so long to write and post this chapter. I can't believe how long it's been. Things have changed so much since June, and yet it feels like no time at all.

I've settled into my new job, which is very busy and mentally challenging, and I'm just about to move house now. Life never stops, does it? I suppose that's what makes it great.

I have to admit, I've really struggled with this chapter. There are some moments where it really flowed but, for the most part, it's been a slog. My muse has clearly up and walked out on me. I just hope she's back now, and full time!

Anyway, enough of my ramblings. Here is chapter 12. I hope you enjoy. xxx

Chapter Twelve

Tome-wan

Mason can feel the itch of drying blood on his cheek, and his nose is beginning to swell from the hit. He glares as the Omega moves away, hating that the weaker man dares to turn his back on him, hating even more that the Omega doesn’t seem to be intimidated by him, as he so rightly should be. The gun remains an obstacle to his punishing him, though, so he remains civil, and endures speaking to his coat.

‘*Why*,’ he drawls, ‘would Dr Lecter want to *kill* me?’

Will shakes his head, eyes locked on the pigs below him.

‘This isn’t about you,’ he replies. His stomach twists at the sight of shredded meat; he doesn’t want to know what it is. ‘Killing you would be… just another hoop for me to jump through.’ He gives a dry chuckle. ‘It’s sauce for the goose that you’re not *particularly* likeable.’

You’re fucking vile, actually.

Mason leans his weight back on the balcony railing and frowns.

‘*I* like me.’

‘You just *stole* your sister’s *womanhood!’* Will snaps, and Mason pouts.

‘She weaponized her *uterus!*’ He waggles his hand. ‘She shouldn’t have been *waving* it around like it was a gun!’

Will looks at him, his eyes burning a furious gold.

‘So, it was *self-defense?*’ he spits, disgusted at the mere *idea* of it.

Mason nods, a hand on his hip.

‘Damn right.’

Will turns away again, his knuckles white beneath the leather of his gloves, his shoulders aching from the tension running like a livewire beneath his skin. When he looks around the barn, however, he creates the picture of calm control.

‘And butchery?’ he asks lightly, drawing an incredulous scoff from the Beta.

‘Are you lecturing me on butchery in my *own* slaughterhouse?’ Mason demands, but Will quickly shakes his head, moving to face him again.

‘Wouldn’t *dream* of it,’ he replies. ‘You could disappear me with a wink.’ His mouth twists into a scathing smile. ‘I heard about the, er *embalmed beef* scandal?’

Mason grins and bounces on his toes.

‘What did you hear?’ he asks, cruelly delighted.

‘One of the Verger meat-packing plants in Chicago was investigated for dangerous conditions,’ Will says. ‘They found several whistle-blowing employees had been, er, *rendered?’* He raises his eyebrows, his dark shadow dancing in the space between them.

Mason chuckles, utterly unrepentant.

‘*Canned*,’ he adds, rubbing his gloved hands together before pacing closer, eyes lit with a mad fire. ‘And *sold*, as “Little Ivy’s Leaf-Lard”.’ He sniggers. ‘It’s a *favorite* among bakers. We didn’t lose a single contract.’

‘No,’ Will says, golden eyes sparking black fire. ‘Blame doesn’t stick to the Vergers.’ He sighs, chewing on his tongue as though deep in thought. Then, once he smells Mason’s scent sharpen with interest, he continues; ‘If *I* kill Hannibal Lecter… That’ll stick to *me*.’

The implication is clear, and Mason narrows his eyes. Perhaps the Omega isn’t as pathetic and useless as the rest of his kind.

‘It is *providence*,’ he agrees, sauntering behind Will to stand on his other side, ‘when a destiny like *yours* is coupled with a man as *resourced* as I am…’

‘I’m just pointing out the snare around your neck,’ Will replies, causing Mason to gulp and tug at his shirt collar. He grins, feigning nonchalance, even as his belly squirms with excitement. ‘What you *do* about it is *entirely* up to you.’

And I can’t wait to see what you do.

The sound of thundering footsteps prevents further conversation, and Will and Mason both turn to see the Sardinian Alpha and his two Betas bounding up the balcony stairs, their guns drawn.

‘Wait!’ Mason calls, throwing out a hand to hold their fire. He flings the other arm back, aware that Will has drawn his weapon, too. ‘Carlo! Stop!’

‘*Sporco Omega!’* Carlo spits, glaring his hatred at the filthy excuse for a man. His head throbs from the beating he’s taken, and his fangs itch to sink into the creature’s throat. Nevertheless, Mason’s order holds him at bay and he lowers his pistol. Behind him, his brothers follow suit, their dark eyes locked onto the weaker caste, and the gun in his undeserving hands.

‘Yes, yes, he’s an Omega,’ Mason says, huffing at the display. He turns to Will, clasping his hands before him. ‘You’ve really pissed him off,’ he warns, nodding backwards to Carlo. ‘*But…’* He chuckles. ‘*I* have a proposition.’

Will narrows his eyes. He lowers the gun but keeps the safety flicked off, ready to fire at any moment.

‘You want me to lure Dr Lecter here?’ he suggests. ‘Prepare an ambush? Turn on him the moment we arrive?’

‘No, no,’ Mason laughs. ‘No, you’d be far too…’ He gestures up and down at Will. ‘*Obvious*.’ He turns to the Alpha behind him. ‘No, *Carlo* and his brothers will capture Dr Lecter.’ He grins. ‘They’re *experts* at kidnapping. Been doing it for *years*. Sort of the family business, if you know what I mean.’

‘Hannibal won’t be an easy target,’ Will warns. ‘He’s fast and he’ll see a threat coming.’

‘So come trattarlo,’ Carlo growls, his eyes burning red at the idea of taking down another Alpha. Will frowns, not understanding the Italian, and Mason frowns.

‘*Look*,’ he says sharply, taking hold of Will’s shoulders and leading him away from the Sard. He dips their heads together in conspiracy, ignoring the resistance in the Omega’s body. ‘All you have to do is tell me when and where is best to snatch him. I mean –’ He grins. ‘I won’t be *relying* on you, but if you *do* help to get him where I want him, *when* I want him there, I’ll let you *watch* when the pigs eat him.’

‘So, essentially, you want me to sit back and do nothing,’ Will says, and Mason pats him on the back like a dog being praised for learning a new trick.

‘Exactly! Y’know, you’re not too dumb for an Omega.’

‘“For an Omega,”’ Will echoes drily, securing his weapon and sliding it back into his coat pocket. He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. ‘When are you planning it?’

Mason chuckles and taps the side of his nose. He leads Will to the stairs, still holding him by the shoulders.

‘You just share his schedule with me,’ he says, walking behind Will as they descend, and showing him out to the courtyard. ‘I’ll do the rest.’

***

The moment he’s out of Mason’s earshot, Will calls Hannibal.

‘I didn’t kill him,’ he says, by way of greeting. ‘I told him *you* wanted to.’

Hannibal is quiet for a moment. Then, in a calm and measured voice, he says,

‘I see.’

Will huffs a laugh, tramping through the snow back to his car. He’s parked on the service road but still monitored by cameras, and he hears one turn to watch him as he walks past.

‘Where are you?’ he asks, glancing up at the little red light glowing out of the dusk. It reminds him of Chilton’s cameras, in the BSHCI, and he shivers. Turns his back on the lens and picks up the pace as the old Volvo comes into sight.

‘At my office,’ Hannibal replies. ‘I had patients this afternoon.’

Will nods to himself.

‘I’ll be there in an hour,’ he says, and hangs up.

At his desk, Hannibal reclines in his chair, fire crackling behind him and ink drying on the pages of his notebook. He clasps his hands together, an odd but not entirely unfamiliar feeling in his gut.

Apprehension. Will makes him nervous.

I told Mason you wanted to kill him.

He hadn't anticipated that from his Omega. Will continues to surprise him, no matter how strong their bond, how joined their minds. He'd expected to hate it – not being able to predict every one of his mate's moves – but instead, he finds himself thrilled, eager to see what Will does next.

They do say that love makes fools of us all, he muses, screwing the lid back onto his fountain pen. He closes the book and carries it with the others up the ladder to the mezzanine library, returning them to his area of patient files.

Will's notes are here; from their very first meeting to the conversation last week. The Omega's story is one of repression and revelation – pain and accomplishment. Hannibal hovers his fingers over the spines, five in total, two more than his average for such a short number of sessions. He tugs the fourth book open and flicks through the pages – misshapen clocks with numbers skidding off the sides, his own comments on Will's fragile beauty and his fractured psyche… And, amidst the writing, mathematical equations.

They are the same that fill his personal notebook; astro- and particle physics, repeated efforts of string theory. The calculations grow more fevered, more doomed to wishful thinking, whenever he and Will fight. Whenever Will suffers.

What he had said to his beloved is true; he wants time to reverse. To make a place in the world for all those he loves.

Will. Abigail. Mischa. Our baby.

Will believes the past cannot be undone. But Hannibal knows that nothing is impossible, when reality is but a construct.

***

'So.' Will's eyes glint in the low light of the fire. 'Can you *explain* my actions?'

He is sat opposite Hannibal, his coat removed and shirt sleeves rolled up. The flames keep him warm; the darkness of the office keeps him safe. He has been honest with his mate, recounting his arrival at Muskrat Farm and knocking the Sardinian Alpha unconscious, then attacking Mason. He explains that he refused to pull the trigger instead advising the unstable Beta to feed Dr Lecter to his pigs.

'Can you *posit* my intentions?' he asks, watching Hannibal for signs of anger. He takes a shaky breath, his stomach twisting into knots – either anxiety or excitement; he can't tell. 'What would be your *theory* of my mind?'

Hannibal, ever calm, considers Will over his hand. He has his legs crossed at the knee, one arm up and knuckles brushing his lips, giving the Omega his full attention.

His own eyes are a warm burgundy, suffused with the red of his caste.

How beautifully cruel you can be, mylimasis.

‘I have an understanding of your state of mind,’ he replies. ‘You understand mine.’ A tiny shrug. ‘We’re just alike.’ He smiles. ‘This gives you the capacity to deceive me. And be deceived *by* me.’

Will scoffs.

‘I’m not deceiving you, Dr Lecter,’ he replies, using Hannibal’s formal title because he knows it rankles the Alpha. He sighs and shrugs, all but inspecting his nails, and repeats the same words he said to Mason. ‘I’m just pointing out the *snare* around your neck. What you do about it is *entirely* up to you.’

Hannibal smiles again, and he points at his mate.

‘*You* put the snare around my neck.’ When Will tips his jaw down, gazing up through his lashes at the Alpha, his heart skips a beat. His Omega is perfect like this; dangerous and devoted. ‘Why did you tell Mason Verger I want to kill him?’ he asks, his pulse rabbit-fast.

Will smirks and the ring of rich gold around his eyes thickens.

‘I was… *curious* what would happen,’ he says, and it’s an acid echo of the night he realized who, and *what*, Hannibal was.

He has the blurred impression of that memory; aiming a gun at Hannibal in Hobbs’s kitchen, his Alpha so cold and impassive… A smile playing with his lips but no warmth there, eyes like chips of black ice. Will remembers his body burning with heat, acid melting his brain…

You were just curious what I would do. An Omega who thinks how I think…. Wind him up and watch him go.

Hannibal has no idea how much he recalls. How many hours he’s spent revisiting all those nights so that he can piece together exactly what the Alpha did to him.

I trusted you, and you tore me apart.

Now, barely three feet away from him, Hannibal’s eyes glint. He doesn’t resent Will his impulse; revenge is, after all, the most honest motivator for cruelty. He says nothing, though, and, after a moment, Will continues,

‘It’s true, isn’t it? You *do* want to kill him. *Or*, you want *me* to kill him; either way, you’d like him dead. I’m just…’ Another shaky sigh, adrenaline making his fingers quiver. ‘Giving you a little nudge.’

‘Mason is discourteous,’ Hannibal explains, his lips thinning in distaste at the mere thought of the man. ‘And discourtesy is *unspeakably* ugly to me.’

It was discourteous of the rabid Alphas to kill and eat Mischa; it was discourteous of Abel Gideon to take credit for my work… It was discourteous of Cassie Boyle to blow cigarette smoke into my face.

Will hums, and glances down at his hand, toying with the stitching on the leather armrest.

‘Are you… thinking about *eating* him?’ he asks, relieved his voice remains steady for the question. He even manages to sound casual about it.

He’s not sure how much of it is an act – Hannibal’s way of thinking is… infectious.

His Alpha’s irises warm from burgundy to crimson.

‘Whenever possible, one should *always* try to eat the rude,’ he replies, to which Will raises his eyebrows.

‘Free-range rude,’ he jokes, and Hannibal smiles. It fades, however, with the seriousness of his next question. The answer, after all, could make or break their relationship.

‘Would you join me at the table?’

Do you accept me for who I really am?

Will’s eyes flash and he curls his upper lip back from his teeth.

‘Mason Verger is a *pig*,’ he growls. ‘And he deserves to be somebody’s bacon.’ He huffs, and then looks directly into Hannibal’s eyes. ‘Maybe you should kill Mason during your next session.’

It is a crude attempt at manipulation; his beloved has ways to go yet before he learns the fine art of persuasion.

Aloud, Hannibal merely replies,

‘He may be intending to kill *me* during our next session.’

Will shrugs.

‘Then you’ll have to kill him first.’

Hannibal chooses not to answer. He won’t allow Will to pull his strings; he refuses to relinquish control to anyone like that, no matter how much he loves him. He decides to move the conversation in a different direction; one of his own design.

‘You said you were curious what would happen,’ he says, and he sees the spark of interest in Will’s gaze. ‘I want you to close your eyes, Will.’ His voice lowers to a purr. ‘Imagine what you would *like* to happen.’

Will takes a deep breath, releasing it along with the tension from his shoulders. He’d known Hannibal would refuse to be coerced so easily; it’s fine. The suggestion of imagining his ideal scenario has his heart skipping a beat. He obeys his Alpha, closing his eyes on the office until there’s nothing but darkness, and molten heat pools between his legs.

He’s back in the barn at the Verger Estate. The smell of sweet hay and pig shit fills his nose. Beneath that, the warm musk of his mate makes his mouth water.

Will imagines Hannibal's face; sharp cheekbones, cruel lips and placid, knowing eyes… His Alpha hangs suspended above the balcony, strapped into a straight-jacket and hoisted into the air by a crane. His bare feet dangle, but Hannibal, of course, is as calm and collected as ever.

I want to hurt you. I want to kill you.

Will's shadow rears up, snatching hold of the knife in his right hand. He brings the blade across the other man's neck, slicing through the skin like butter.

You killed Abigail. You bonded me. Betrayed me. Tortured me and had me locked up. You're a serial killer.

Blood sprays. Hannibal lifts his head, allowing Will to see the damage he's done. The gaping wound, spilling crimson down the white cotton of the restraints…

Copper fills the air, settling heavy on Will's tongue. There's blood everywhere; it steams in the cold air. It covers his face, staining his pores, ruining his shirt…

Hannibal keeps his eyes locked on Will, his smile content and scent thick with arousal. He's *proud* of Will; the devoted expression is what sends another jolt of liquid fire down through Will's belly.

You love seeing my dark side, even if it's aimed at you.

The crane begins to whir, dragging Hannibal away from Will. Over the maze of wrought iron and steel, towards the opening in the very center.

The hogs scream their rage, crashing against the walls of the enclosure as they track the scent of fresh blood. They're hungry, and the maze only serves to make them angry.

Hannibal's blood pours out of him, just as it did when Matthew Brown sliced his wrists.

How much can the body lose before death occurs?

They never look away from each other, not even when Hannibal is lowered into the pen. Will watches, cold fury protecting him as Hannibal's proud love for him flickers and gives way to fear… He is not always in control; he can be made vulnerable.

The pigs squeal, riled to insanity. Will imagines them clamping down on Hannibal's legs, teeth slicing through muscle and crushing bone, tearing off great chunks of flesh. Hannibal would flail, the pain washing through him like ice, breaking his composure.

Maybe he would cry out, maybe he would struggle, twisting against the straight-jacket with no hope of escape.

They're horrible, aren't they? Will thinks, his shadow a vicious razor on his tongue. *I hope you dislocate your shoulder trying to get free.*

Hannibal would be eaten alive, wrenched down from the hook to be trampled and tugged, a rag doll fought over by the big males. One boar might eat his face; ripping off his nose and

swallowing it whole. His eyes would be next; popped from their sockets by razor tusks or squashed under the weight of a sow… Ribs would snap, puncturing his lungs, his stomach… Intestines would spill out and the soft mush of organs would be fodder for the hogs…

Will opens his eyes to the sound of his own purring. His irises are pure gold; he can feel the itching pulse, and, when he glances down, an erection tents his pants.

Hannibal watches him, impassive but for the flare of his nostrils and the maroon of his eyes.

'What did you see?' he asks, soft and intimate. When Will pauses, his lips tug into a smile and his own purrs ring out to join those of his mate. Something wicked, it would seem.

Will grins, darkness pulsing through his veins. The lingering screams of Hannibal's imagined death are music to his ears. He would be free; the baby would be free. There would be no more Chesapeake Ripper, no more torture, no more mind games…

'I saw… an *opportunity*,' he says, and Hannibal hums.

'You murdered me again?'

Will huffs a laugh.

'It's a common theme, isn't it?' He shifts in the chair, unwilling to acknowledge his arousal. 'You hurt me; I imagine how it would feel to kill you… You win again.'

'Are you keeping score?' Hannibal asks, curious how it would compare to his own. Will snorts, though, and he quirks an eyebrow in question.

'What would be the point?' Will explains. 'The game is rigged in your favor.'

Hannibal tilts his head.

'Do you believe we're playing?'

'We've been playing from the start,' Will replies. 'I just didn't know the rules when we began.'

'You still resent me,' Hannibal says. 'For bonding you?'

Will opens his mouth to reply and then pauses. He swallows, rubbing his fingers together as he considers his response. Considers the man, the monster, sat across from him. The twisted games, the manipulations, the lies…

The look on Hannibal's face when he told him he was pregnant. The way he kissed him their first night as a mated pair…

'I think,' he says carefully, his heart crushed between pain and love; 'that bonding me was the first honest thing you've done in a very long time.'

It's what makes deceiving you so much harder.

***

Mason's next session is the following morning. Hannibal shows him in, keeping the Beta in his sights as he closes the door, sealing them in together, and watches as the Verger heir saunters about the room. He is as obnoxious as ever, though there is a brittle quality to it now. An affectedness to what was already a poor façade.

As Mason flicks through the graphite and charcoal drawings on Hannibal's side table, the Alpha surreptitiously retrieves the scalpel from his desk and slides it up his sleeve, ready to flick down in an instant. The razor edge slices through skin and muscle with deadly speed.

'Good,' Mason declares, overtly criticizing Dr Lecter's little sketches, just to rankle the arrogant, foolhardy Alpha. 'Garbage…' Without looking up from another sheet of paper, he adds, 'Shall we talk about what happened to *poor* Margot?'

Hannibal straightens the sleeve of his suit jacket and clasps his hands before him.

'We can get to that later.'

'Oh, we can get to it now,' Mason corrects. He sniffs over a pitiful imitation of a DaVinci and shoves two sketches together, uncaring that he smudges the pencil. 'Family affairs are best left to the *family*, Dr Lecter. You interfered.'

'I provided counsel,' Hannibal replies, but Mason merely lifts his head in challenge, his eyes flashing behind his glasses.

'You subverted me.'

Hannibal considers him for a moment, his eyes a deep maroon.

'While you were subverting the underprivileged children at your summer camp,' he asks, 'what did you learn?'

'Hmm…' Mason's voice edges on a whine, but he decides to play along. 'Keen student of the Bible that I am…' He strides to Dr Lecter's desk, slamming his hand down onto the back of the leather chair and swinging it around so he can sit in it. 'I learned about *suffering*.'

He props his feet up on the polished mahogany, ankles crossed, brogues scuffing the polished wood.

'Not *mine*, mind you,' he continues, speaking up to the mezzanine library. 'But the general *conceit.*' He fixes Lecter with a hard stare, challenging him over the top of his knuckles.

Hannibal regards him, and his words, and then turns away, very deliberately showing Mason his back. It is a statement of his confidence; he is not intimidated by the Beta, and takes his seat in the leather armchair before the windows as he replies,

'God's choices in inflicting suffering are not satisfactory to us,' he replies. 'Nor are they understandable…' His eyes flash crimson, though he represses a smirk. 'Unless innocence offends him.'

Mason is silent for a second and then,

'*Hah!*' He slaps his knees with the force of his laughter, which bursts out of him like a cough. He swings down from lounging at the desk and sits forwards, leaving sticky fingermarks on the glass-sheen of polish. '*Clearly,* He needs help in directing His blind *fury*,' he says. 'With which He flogs this…' He gestures around him. 'Earth.'

'Margot's happiness is more important than her suffering,' Hannibal says coolly, and Mason narrows his eyes.

'You say that as though the two are mutually exclusive,' he replies, fiddling with his signet ring. Margot still has a scar on her back from this ring; an indentation of the brand.

Hannibal looks over, no longer hiding his disdain.

'I believe they are.'

There's a second, where Mason mulls over the reply, and then he spins the chair around.

'Can never say with a *certainty*,' he says, pushing up to his feet. 'It is one of those things that is… "hid"… as the Bible says.' He wanders towards Dr Lecter, withdrawing a small folding knife from his belt as he does. 'Papa taught me how to hide all *sorts* of things.'

He opens the blade, hating how stiff the little mechanism is, and then holds it to the Alpha's throat, right under his ear. Lecter's pulse beats there, beneath the skin, and Mason likes to imagine that he can see it speeding up under the threat.

Hannibal represses the urge to roll his eyes. He glances down and then turns his head sideways, feigning mild surprise at such a juvenile gesture.

Mason nods to himself, pleased by the reaction.

'This was his knife,' he murmurs, using a knuckle to push his glasses back up his nose. 'I carry it around with me… to remind me of him.'

Hannibal hums.

'Whose fat are you planning to measure today, Mason? Mine?'

Mason barks another laugh and straightens up.

'No fat on *you*,' he chuckles. 'Take more than a flesh wound to make *you* squeal.' He goes around to his designated armchair and plonks himself down, crossing his legs in mirror to the Alpha. Stabs the knife down into the expensive leather of the armrest, puncturing it beyond repair. 'What game of *chicken* are you and your slutty little Omegan *sperm donor* playing, Dr Lecter?'

Leaving the knife sticking up from the furniture, Mason sits forwards, an odd light playing in his blue eyes.

‘Don’t get me *wrong*,’ he continues. ‘I play chicken with Margot *all* the time.’ A grin. ‘I just don’t *tell* her I’m playing.’

Hannibal remains silent, waiting to see what Mason will do next. The Beta frowns, and sits back in the seat. His fidgeting is indicative of his underlying nervousness, which Hannibal enjoys.

‘I’m *good* at chicken, Dr Lecter.’ Mason wishes he could add a growl to his voice, but the warning is there, nonetheless. He stabs the knife into the armrest again. ‘I never blink.’

The damn Alpha doesn’t blink, either, even as his boujee furniture is destroyed, and Mason lets spittle fly as he laughs, waving away the damage.

‘Just send me the bill!’ he cackles. ‘I’m so sorry! I just get so… *carried* away!’

Hannibal closes his eyes, a small smile tugging at his lips. The danger has passed, and the tingle of Rut hormones fades from his body.

Mason is here simply to threaten him. He thinks he can intimidate him with idle threats and an impotent display of violence. But he is not a killer.

No; Mason Verger will hire someone *else* to do *that*.

***

Dressing is painful, but Margot doesn’t want to spend any longer in the hospital-issued gown than she has to.

She pulls on her bra, wincing at the ache of her bruised collarbone and pulled muscles, hating the way it drags along her old scars. The new one, a livid gash across her lower abdomen, is an ugly reminder of what Mason did to her, and she can’t help but stare at it, her stomach churning with shame at her helplessness, misery tugging down the corners of her mouth.

She sighs – what good is regret – and shimmies into her silk-blend pants, ignoring the squeeze of the waistband when she buttons them over her swollen belly. The inflammation will go down; not like Will, who is still pregnant and who is only going to get bigger as he gets to full-term.

We could have had a child together. I could have been free.

The first visitors she permits – aside from Mason, who doesn’t require permission – are the Alpha and Omega. Will is pale; his hair a mess from running his fingers through it, coat drawn tight about his throat and arms across his front. He doesn’t realize it, perhaps, but he’s subconsciously shielding his own fetus. As though her bad luck might somehow infect him, too.

Margot forces herself to be calm, to be still. Her voice, when she speaks, is flat as ever.

‘They could have done what they did laparoscopically,’ she muses, eyes on the laminate floor in front of her, ‘but my brother told them to leave a scar.’

Will's eyes flash gold and he growls in his throat.

'He *branded* you.'

Wouldn't be the first time, Margot thinks, though she doesn't respond aloud. What's the point? What's done is done.

When the young Omega makes no move to reply, Hannibal's own chest tightens. It is an instinctive response; an Alphan reaction to the scent of her distress. Mason would have a much harder time torturing his sister if he were the Alpha he wished to be.

'Mason wants you to know this can never be undone,' he says, tilting his head to study her. He is sat in one of the red leather armchairs, with Margot perched on the armrest of the other. His coat is draped over the back of the seat, his hands clasped before him. He sits forwards, elbows on his knees, and catches a glimpse of the crimson in his eyes when he spots his reflection in the glass coffee table between them.

'Mason can be undone,' Will reasons, and Hannibal's heart skips a beat at the *darkness* in his mate's voice. There is such promise in those light-spoken words.

Margot, however, barely sighs.

'Not without taking everything I have with him,' she replies. 'He's my legal guardian. Without him, I'd be under the care of the Southern Baptist Church. He's all I've got now. That's –' She pauses, her throat constricted. '… exactly what he wanted.'

Tears shine in her golden eyes, but she doesn't let them fall. She will never cry again.

'He won.' Her expression hardens. 'He always wins.'

He won when he branded the nape of my neck. He won when he raped me. He won when he whipped me raw.

'This won't make you human, Margot,' Hannibal comforts, 'so much as give you the ability to make *yourself* human, and move on.'

Margot ducks her head.

'There's no resolve to this,' she replies, and the *emptiness* of her tone, the bleakness, hurts Will's heart. Margot just shakes her head, utterly broken. 'There's no resolution.'

'Your moving on…' Will wets his lips, trying to steady his voice because he needs her to listen; he needs her to *understand.* 'It isn't just a distraction… It's a *rebuke*.' He straightens his shoulders, his jaw clenched and eyes golden. 'Show your brother how strong you are… Survive him.'

And Hannibal and I… We'll kill him.

***

Watching Will in his office, hands casually in the pockets of his slacks, brow creased and eyes fixed, Jack can see how much the Omega has changed. Tension has drained from his shoulders and his pervasive nervousness has been tempered by the same quiet confidence of his Alpha.

He may not realize it, but Will moves like a predator, now.

'How are things going?' he asks, disturbed by the stillness of the other man; the dangerous edge to his brooding.

Will hums, considering the question.

'Hannibal has a certain… *personality style* we can all learn from,' he replies, his thoughts a hundred miles away in Margot's hospital room. He wants to strip Mason Verger, beat him with hot irons and then feed him to his pigs, kicking and screaming. He feels his own eyes itch as they flare bright gold, and he swallows back the dark urges clogging his throat. 'In moderation, of course.'

He is driven and dedicated. What he wants, he gets. I admire that.

Jack shakes his head, his eyes flickering red.

'*All* I want to do is *catch* him.'

'He's given me *nothing*, Jack!' Will huffs and shakes his own head in return, yanked back to reality and the frustration of his current predicament. '*Nothing* actionable. He has confessed to *nothing*; he's acknowledged only… *vagaries*.'

'I need more than vagaries!' Jack insists, striding towards him from his desk. 'You have *killed* someone, Will!'

'Who was trying to kill *me!'* Will protests, but Jack growls.

'I don't know if I can *prove* that! You mutilated the body!' When the Omega merely looks away, jaw clenched, he continues, 'We made a public spectacle of Freddie Lounds's death. I am out on a *limb* here, and the limb is going to *break!'*

Will looks away and lifts one hand from his pockets to scrub at the neatly-trimmed beard on his face. Jack narrows his eyes; the Omega is hiding something from him.

'I've only told the OIG what they need to know; now, what haven't you told me?'

Will whines softly before he can stop himself, and rubs his throat as if it has betrayed him. Then he slides his hand around to squeeze the crest at the back of his neck. He is soothing himself; it must be something bad for him to seek the comfort of a nuchal manipulation.

Sighing, a warm glow sliding through his veins from the quick pinch to his nape, Will debates whether or not to fully confide in Jack. He can't hide it all from him; he needs to come clean about part of the Verger plan.

‘Hannibal’s trying to manipulate me into murdering one of his patients,’ he says, his lips twisting even before he speaks the repugnant Beta’s name. ‘*Mason Verger*.’ Jack says nothing; just narrows his eyes, waiting for the rest. Will wets his lips. ‘But *I* can manipulate Hannibal into killing him, instead.’

The Alpha comes closer, considering him with suspicion.

‘What’s Verger done?’

The truth sticks in Will’s throat – he *can’t* tell Jack about the baby. About Margot.

‘Hannibal considers him *rude*,’ he says, his voice trembling with poorly concealed venom. ‘That’s motive enough.’

It’s reason enough for a man like Mason.

To hide his own hatred for the Beta, he shrugs and adds,

‘It’s as though committing murders has *purged* him of lesser rudeness.’

Will he kill me if I become too rude? Will he kill the baby?

Jack growls, and begins to pace behind his desk, shoulders bulging inside his navy suit.

‘You’re talking about putting a man’s *life* in danger.’

Will scoffs, and kicks off from the wall beside the glass doors. Mason isn’t a *man*.

‘Y’know, sometimes, Jack, a good plan is less about finding the *best* alternative than it is about finding one that *works*.’

It’s a bad reason; a cold and cruel excuse, and Jack comes back to him, palms up to draw his attention and soothe him.

‘Don’t let your bond confuse what *you* want with what *Lecter* wants,’ he begs, and Will’s nostrils flare at the insult.

‘I told you, Jack.’ He approaches the desk from the other side, chin up in defiance of the Alpha’s calming pheromones. ‘I’m a good fisherman.’ His eyes burn gold. ‘We have to use the right bait. When Hannibal tries to kill Mason Verger, I’ll arrest him and you’ll have two witnesses.’

Me and Margot. Mason, sadly, will bleed out before the ambulance arrives.

Jack considers him for a moment, and then nods grimly.

‘We might have three.’ He tilts his head, eyes glowing crimson. ‘I’m a good fisherman too, Will.’

And I think you’ve waded in too deep.

He jerks his head, inviting the Omega to follow him. Will frowns, confused by the instruction. He trails after Jack, down endless familiar corridors until they reach the interrogation rooms. Jack leads him into the observation booth and Will's heart skips a beat when he sees the slim, blond haired Alpha pacing alone inside the room on the other side of the one-way mirror.

I believe you.

Dr Du Maurier's chest is a vice, her stomach a lead pit. She tries not to flinch at the over-loud clack of her stiletto heels on the tiled floor, ignoring the bead of sweat rolling down her spine beneath a red silk blouse.

Her knuckles are white from clenching the leather straps of her purse.

Will's eyes bore holes into Jack.

'I want to talk to her.'

'So do I,' the Alpha replies, though he makes no move to leave immediately. Will turns back to the glass, his pulse racing.

'How did you track her down?' he asks, itching to reach out for the microphone and begin questioning her immediately.

Why did you say you believed me? Who has Hannibal done this to before? Has he ever been Bonded before? Has he manipulated other people? How many? What happened to them? Why me?

'Used up all my favors and contacts in the North of America,' Jack replies, rolling his eyes. 'Called in a few debts from colleagues over the border in Canada… Someone tipped me off to a blond Alpha psychiatrist working out of Vancouver. Had a couple of Agents trail her for a few weeks; picked her up this morning.'

Will turns to him, jaw set.

'Has anyone questioned her, yet?' he asks, blinking in surprise when Jack hands him the file.

'I owe you a favor, too,' the Alpha explains, giving Will's upper arm a squeeze. 'But I'll be watching.'

***

So, it's true. He set you free.

Bedelia's heart sinks as she watches Will Graham approach the table. He looks better than he did the last time she saw him, but Hannibal's influence is more pronounced, now. The tailored clothes, the elegance of his movements; they speak to the confidence of a man accustomed to inflicting his will upon others.

Have you killed anyone, yet?

‘They tell me you were hard to find,’ Will says, by way of greeting.

Bedelia quirks a golden eyebrow at him.

‘That was the idea.’

And now you’ve ruined it.

Will swallows, nodding. He understands the danger they’ve placed her in; she ran from Hannibal. He isn’t likely to forget that snub.

‘Thank you,’ he says, finding his throat suddenly dry. ‘For visiting me in the hospital.’ He wets his lips, eyes searching the scratched metal of the table between them. ‘And… for what you said.’

Bedelia’s eyes grow dark with sorrow.

‘I didn’t say enough.’

I didn’t tell you to leave him. To stay as far away from him as you possibly can. To remain incarcerated, rather than return to him.

Will hums. He drops the folder onto the brushed metal table between them, and takes a seat across from the Alpha.

‘Well, now’s your chance to say it all.’ He opens the file to read from the statement before him, knowing that Jack Crawford is listening carefully through the monitors. ‘You’ve been granted immunity from prosecution by the US Attorney from District 36, and by local authorities in the memorandum attached.’ He slides the paperwork across to Bedelia. ‘Sworn and attested.’

Bedelia’s slender fingers tremble as she reaches for the document. She sets her handbag down and flips through the pages, tapping the words with a crimson-painted nail. When she’s satisfied that it isn’t a hoax, she raises a steely blue gaze back to the Omega opposite her.

Will’s eyes shine.

‘Let’s talk about Hannibal Lecter.’

Bedelia’s lips thin. When she replies, her voice is as sad and weary as before.

‘Some psychiatrists are so… *hungry* for insight… that they may try to *manufacture* it.’ She swallows. ‘How deadly that can be for the patient who believes them.’

Hannibal is so desperate to find someone like him; he turns other people into monsters. And I, I was so desperate to help him that I convinced myself I was.

‘You were Dr Lecter’s psychiatrist,’ Will replies, misunderstanding. ‘He wasn’t yours.’

Bedelia grimaces, her irises heavily ringed with red.

‘I told myself that,’ she says. ‘But I was under Hannibal’s influence.’ Another flash of red. ‘What he did to you made that… *abundantly* clear.’

You’re just like him, now.

Will’s breath falters, and Bedelia realizes he knows some of what his Alpha is doing to him. Realizes he is going along with it…

She wonders just how much of his acquiescence is truly his choice, and how much is his conditioning.

‘You were attacked,’ Will says, drawing the conversation forward, like an oar through molasses. ‘By a patient who was formerly under Dr Lecter’s care.’ He glances down at the file. ‘That patient *died* during the attack; report said he swallowed his tongue.’

Before he can ask, Bedelia speaks the awful truth.

‘It wasn’t *attached* at the time.’

Will’s blood freezes in his veins, and his shadow roars approval at the sadism of the murder. To remove somebody’s tongue and have them choke on it… Or perhaps to have them bite it off and drown in blood…

‘How… *exactly* did your patient die?’ he asks, dreading the answer but desperate to know.

I need to know how far you’ll go; how far Hannibal could push you to go, so I know how far he’ll take me.

Bedelia’s eyes flood with red, her irises burning like hot coals in the darkness of the room.

‘I killed him.’ She looks past Will’s shoulder, to her own reflection in the two-way mirror. Jack Crawford is watching, no doubt, and she speaks to them both when she continues, ‘I believed it was self-defense. And… to a point, it was. But, beyond that point, it was murder.’

Randall Tier’s mutilated body jumps to the forefront of Jack’s mind. Will’s outburst, claiming it was self-defense… The precision of the tableau afterwards…

He feels sick as Dr Lecter’s psychiatrist continues to speak, her soft drawl brandishing the ugly truth into him like a hot iron.

‘Hannibal *influenced* me to murder my patient… *Our* patient.’

Will glances down, golden eyes dark with disappointment. Bedelia’s words are damning, but not to Hannibal.

You have killed someone, Will!

‘You weren’t…’ He wets his lips, searching for the right word. The right form of innocence. ‘*Coerced?’*

‘What Hannibal does is not coercion,’ Bedelia replies, voice steady but knuckles white where she twists her hands in her lap. ‘It is *persuasion*.’ When the Omega stirs at that, Bedelia’s stomach drops and bile tickles her throat. ‘Has he ever tried to… *persuade* you to kill anybody?’ When the other man stares at her, she quirks an eyebrow. ‘He will.’

Is that what Hannibal did… Persuaded me to kill Randall? Will’s mind spins with denial, but the truth is even uglier than the possibility that his Alpha, his *mate*, is still fucking with his mind. *Or has he just opened up something inside me that was always there?*

‘And it will be somebody you love,’ Bedelia adds, sending ice skittering through his insides. ‘And you will think it’s the *only* choice you have.’

I have to kill him… It’s the only way to protect the baby…

Will can hardly believe Hannibal would be so reckless as to persuade him to consider murdering *him*, but it’s there, that insidious desire, coiled like a snake unwilling to leave the dark sanctuary of his mind.

And, by fantasizing about killing Hannibal, Will has grown accustomed to the idea of murdering those he deems a threat. First Randall, now Mason…

Not coercion. Persuasion.

He sits back, watching the sweaty outline of his hands fade from the tabletop.

This has to stop, now, before it’s too late.

‘How would you catch him?’ he asks, mouth downturned, brow furrowed with sadness at the very idea of incarcerating his mate. Bedelia’s chest tightens at the sight of it; she admires his strength to even suggest such a thing.

‘Hannibal can get lost in… *self-congratulation*,’ she replies, thinking of the glasses of wine shared over Will’s imprisonment, the veal dinner brought to her house. ‘At his own… *exquisite* taste and cunning.’ Her lips curve into an almost-smile. ‘Whimsy.’ The expression darkens again. ‘That will be how he will get caught.’

She leaves the rest unsaid, deafening in the silence between them.

But now. And not by you.

***

He drives straight across town after his meeting with Bedelia, and waits impatiently for Hannibal’s patient to be finished.

Jack’s going to get what he needs from Bedelia, he thinks, his leg bouncing as he forces himself to sit in one of the chairs facing the office door. *She’ll give him enough to arrest Hannibal and this will be over…*

It’s all coming together, the pieces moving in like the folds of a net.

Why does he feel trapped, too?

When his Alpha finally emerges, bidding a fur-swathed Beta woman farewell, his face recognizes surprise and concern before pleasure. Hannibal shakes Mrs. Vandermeer's hand and watches her leave, just long enough so as not to appear rude, before crossing the lobby to take Will by the shoulders.

'Are you alright?' he asks, scenting his mate for the cause of his nervousness. 'What's happened?'

Will jerks his chin towards the room.

'Can we…?' he trails off and nudges Hannibal. He really doesn't want to talk about it out here; the office is their safe space but this room is too open. Too exposed.

When they're secured inside, Will sheds his coat, gloves and scarf, and takes a seat in his usual armchair.

'Jack found Bedelia,' he says, skipping the preamble. 'He brought her in for questioning at Quantico.'

'I see.' Hannibal studies his emotional response to this news. A prickle of apprehension, not quite fear, but more than curiosity. It is the faint whisper of the hunt, seen through the eye of the prey. He fetches a decanter of 1974 Cabernet Sauvignon from the sideboard. 'Well, he is nothing if not tenacious… How *is* Dr Du Maurier?'

'Scared,' Will replies, and Hannibal's eyes flicker red. 'She tried very hard to disappear.'

'Yes,' Hannibal agrees, unstopping the carafe and dipping his nose to scent it. Perfectly breathed. 'She proved most *elusive*.'

'And now she's back.' Will's knee bounces again. 'Should we be concerned?'

Hannibal pours them each a glass of wine, the liquid dark against the brightness of the fire behind him. He rolls the decanter, ending the pour with a heavy drip, each measure identical.

'We're maintaining our position on the event horizon of chaos,' he replies, and Will manages a wonky smile.

'Your veneer of self-composure gives a *strong* sense of the surreal,' he admits, tracking the other man as Hannibal brings both glasses towards the armchairs. As he reaches for his glass, the stem held carefully between Hannibal's long fingers, he adds, 'So much of this feels like a dream.'

'Dreams prepare us for waking life.' Hannibal unbuttons his suit jacket and sits across from Will, perched on the edge of the seat, raptly attentive.

Will grimaces.

'It's one thing to dream,' he says. 'It's another to understand the *nature* of the dream.'

They both dip their noses to the wine, inhaling the scent of it and allowing it to settle on their tongues.

For just a second, they are perfectly alike. Then, Will takes a drink and Hannibal speaks.

‘You’re waking up to who you are, and that’s all you need to understand.’

We can deal with everything else together.

As Will lowers the glass from his mouth, Hannibal raises the rim of his to his lips. The Omega swallows, then the Alpha.

Will watches Hannibal closely, elbows balanced on the armrests of what smells like a new chair, one leg crossed over the other; the picture of ease.

Hannibal, for once, remains tense.

‘There are extraordinary circumstances here, Will,’ he continues, resisting the urge to fiddle with the glass and gazing instead at his beloved. ‘And unusual opportunities.’

Will lifts one eyebrow.

‘For whom?’

‘For both of us,’ Hannibal confesses, and the Omega’s eyes flash gold.

‘Mason Verger’s an opportunity?’

Hannibal sighs.

‘Mason Verger is a *problem*.’ He shrugs. ‘Problem solving is hunting. It’s a savage pleasure, and we are born to it.’ His eyes warm to red. ‘A pleasure we can share.’

Will huffs, and sets his wine down on the table beside him. As delicious as it is, he shouldn’t drink more than a sip or two.

‘You’re fostering codependency,’ he warns. Hannibal merely lifts the glass to his mouth again and savors the smell, the corners of his mouth lifting in a flirtatious smile.

‘Is *that* what I’m doing?’

Will narrows his eyes, chewing on his tongue as he considers his next move.

‘Isn’t that what you did to Abigail?’ He plays with the stitching of the leather. ‘Got her to take a life so she’d owe you hers?’

Hannibal, having taken another drink of wine, sets it aside and sits back in the chair. He mimics Will’s position and clasps his hands in his lap, confessing to nothing.

Will taps the chair again and then uncrosses his legs. He sits forwards, just like the Alpha had moments before.

‘I bond with Abigail, you take her away.’ He shakes his head. ‘I bond with… barely more than the *idea* of a child outside of this relationship, you take it away.’ He takes a shaky breath and brings his clasped hands to his mouth, biting at the knuckles. ‘You saw to it that I alienated Alana, alienated Jack…’ His golden eyes bore into Hannibal, just as the Alpha’s red eyes bore into him. ‘You don’t want me to have *anything* in my life that’s not *you*.’

You’re manipulative and abusive, and I shouldn’t love you but I do.

‘I only want what’s best for you,’ Hannibal replies, but Will scoffs.

‘Oh, *please*.’ At the Alpha’s questioning eyebrow, he explains; ‘Every *moment* of cogent thought whilst bonded to you is a *personal* victory.’

You don’t have to manipulate me with my crest anymore; I’m as twisted and sadistic as you are all by myself. You won; you turned me into the monster you always thought I’d be.

‘You’re applying yourself to my perspective,’ Hannibal says, barely able to contain his purring. ‘As I’ve been applying myself to yours.’

I know your mind, mylimasis. I’ve built many of the rooms there, and now I’ve allowed you entry to my own Palace. A place we can be together, always.

Will swallows, his chest tight. He nods, wetting his lips.

‘You’re right,’ he says, making Hannibal tilt his head curiously. ‘We *are* just alike.’ He smiles sadly. ‘You’re as alone as I am.’

We’re alone in the darkness, reaching for one another because the isolation is unbearable. We’re the only ones who really understand each other.

‘And,’ he adds, his voice wobbling, ‘we’re both alone, without each other.’

I can never get away from you. You’re a part of me, now.

Hannibal considers him for a moment, before returning to his wine. He takes another sip, holding the liquid in his mouth, and then swallows.

‘Then it’s a good thing we have each other,’ he says carefully, feigning a lightness he doesn’t truly feel. He glances up at Will. ‘Isn’t it?’

We do have each other… don’t we?

Will swallows, feeling his pulse in every part of his body. Does Hannibal suspect? Does he know? He searches his gaze, looking for a hint of doubt, a spark of mistrust, but all he sees is worry. The deep-seated and subconscious fear of a child abandoned to danger; a man damaged by the horror of his youth.

His heart fractures, mind and soul tearing apart. He won’t change course, no matter what.

I have to do this.

‘Yes,’ he whispers, his voice thick with the lie. ‘It’s good.’

***

That evening, as Hannibal and Will peruse the deli meats of the French charcuterie stall at the Baltimore Night Market, Bedelia Du Maurier shifts position on the cold metal chair of the FBI interrogation room at Quantico, her left buttock half-numb.

Her blue eyes lock onto the fellow Alpha pacing the room across from her; Jack’s irises are thickly red, his shoulders hunched, and his hands twitch in and out of furious fists.

‘So, you managed to avoid prosecution,’ he says, shaking his head in disgust. When Bedelia merely smirks at him, he blows out his breath and takes the chair opposite her. ‘I gave you every opportunity to tell the truth, but you ran.’

Bedelia regards him coldly.

‘How do you think the FBI could have protected me?’ She quirks a golden eyebrow. ‘You couldn’t protect Will Graham; you still can’t.’

He is so enamored by Hannibal; he doesn’t even see the damage he’s doing to himself.

‘Nothing makes us more vulnerable than loneliness, Agent Crawford. A lonely Omega is the most vulnerable of all.’

Jack shakes his head.

‘Will’s not alone.’

‘No,’ Bedelia agrees; ‘He’s *not*.’

He’s bonded to Hannibal Lecter; the man who framed him for murder and had him institutionalized. The man he claims is the Chesapeake Ripper… It takes a particular kind of person to forgive such actions.

‘Hannibal thinks Will is a killer,’ she continues. ‘Do you still believe he is *your* killer?’

‘I have to believe,’ Jack replies, his lips thinning in distaste.

Bedelia sighs.

‘Hannibal’s only crime I witnessed was influence,’ she says. Then, ‘Influence works best when we’re *unaware*… Will Graham has been *very* aware.’

‘Meaning?’ Jack snaps, his pulse racing at the insinuation.

‘Meaning,’ Bedelia replies, ‘maybe Mr Graham doesn’t know himself as well as Hannibal does.’

He is not the delicate little Omega you think he is. He has the same darkness in him as his mate, and it was there before they bonded.

Jack tuts, and shakes his head.

‘Will has more reason to see Hannibal caught than any of us.’

‘Even though he’s Hannibal’s *mate?’* Bedelia sneers at Jack’s blushing scowl. Then, she sobers. ‘If you think you’re about to catch Hannibal,’ she warns, ‘that’s because he *wants* you to think that.’ Her eyes flash crimson. ‘Don’t fool yourself into thinking he’s not in *control* of what’s happening.’

He’s always in control. That’s why he always wins.

***

‘Pan-fried prosciutto roses on watermelon, with a truffle glaze and black olive tapenade.’

Hannibal places the little plate before Will, the starter a mouthwatering display of culinary skill.

‘Safe for you and the baby,’ he adds, giving his mate’s shoulder a squeeze.

‘Is this from the deli?’ Will asks, picking up his fork and spearing one of the cubes. ‘It smells delicious.’

Hannibal nods and takes his own seat, unfolding his napkin and laying it over his lap.

‘I must admit,’ he says, picking up both knife and fork, ‘cooking for a pregnant person *is* a challenge.’

‘Sorry to be such an inconvenience,’ Will says dryly, grinning at him around a mouthful of starter.

Hannibal shakes his head.

‘You could never be an inconvenience, Will,’ he promises, but Will shrugs a shoulder.

‘We’ll see.’ He chuckles when Hannibal looks at him questioningly. ‘Try telling me we’re not inconvenient when I’m sending you out in the middle of the night for grape soda and watermelon Nerds, *specifically that flavor*, or when our baby has puked all over your thousand-dollar suit jacket for the tenth time.’

‘I don’t intend to wear my suits around the child,’ Hannibal replies, chewing thoughtfully before adding, ‘And I’ll stock the pantry with your soda and candy if required.’ His eyes glint. ‘Though I would strongly encourage you to avoid putting anything so vile into your body.’

‘Vile things have a habit of entering my body,’ Will says lightly, kicking Hannibal’s leg and laughing when the Alpha bares his teeth.

‘You are a wicked boy,’ Hannibal growls, shaking his head at his own acceptance of the way Will dips his finger into the remaining tapenade on his plate and brings it, unashamedly, to his lips. Rude, uncouth and yet…

‘Careful, Dr Lecter,’ Will purrs, his eyes glowing gold. ‘You’re drooling.’

‘Merely wondering how such an attractive man can act like such a cretin,’ Hannibal replies, scooping up the plates and taking them into the kitchen, Will’s laugh ringing in his ears.

He checks the copper pot of bones simmering on the hob – preparation for his dinner with Uncle Jack the following evening – and then, after skimming scum from the surface of the broth, plates up this evening’s main course, adding pomegranate and bird skulls as an embellishment to the platter.

When he returns to the dining room, he sees that Will has poured himself more sparkling water and topped up Hannibal’s wine, though he is lingering by the wall of stacked herbs instead of waiting patiently in his seat.

‘Mm.’ Will turns and makes a show of scenting the air, humming his pleasure at the smell of it. ‘Smells good. Mint?’

‘Sous vide chicken breast with black garlic, chestnut mushrooms and asparagus,’ Hannibal corrects, setting each plate down and raising an eyebrow expectantly at the Omega.

Will chuckles.

‘Sounds great. So, where’s the mint?’ He gestures to the wall, and Hannibal ducks his head with a rueful smile.

‘Third from the left, second row,’ he says, and Will picks himself a handful of leaves to add to his water.

Hannibal makes a note to create some mouthwatering juices and smoothies for his mate. There are several he can think of that could include semen or blood for an extra kick…

‘I’m going back the farmhouse in the morning,’ Will says distracting him. ‘Going to stay there for a few days.’

‘Of course.’ Hannibal keeps his tone light, but Will still smirks when he senses the disappointment and fierce jealousy poisoning his mate’s veins. He deliberately waits until Hannibal has a mouthful of food before adding,

‘You can come with me, if you want to?’

Hannibal dabs at his mouth with his napkin, hiding a sigh of relief. He washes his food down with a sip of crisp Sauvignon Blanc and then looks at his Omega, who is sitting in smug silence with a forkful of meat ready to be eaten.

‘I’m hosting our dear Uncle Jack tomorrow evening,’ the Alpha says, gathering another collection of flavors on his cutlery. ‘I could join you the day after?’

‘I’m not invited?’ Will feigns hurt and then chuckles around his food, forgetting to wipe his mouth before taking a drink.

‘It’s an overdue conversation,’ Hannibal explains, curious as to the lack of repulsion he feels at the smear of grease on the rim of Will’s glass. ‘Jack’s suspicions won’t let him rest; he needs my guidance in these troubled times.’

That, or he wants you to know he’s onto you, Will thinks, frowning at his plate. He takes another bite but the poultry turns to ash on his tongue.

‘You’re not worried?’ he asks, and Hannibal smiles, his eyes gleaming.

‘I have everything under control.’

It’s why I always win.

‘You don’t have *me* under control,’ Will says quietly, his eyes still on his plate. He swallows, the food nothing but bitter mush, and sets his fork down. He eyes the remnants of food on his knife, the blade smudged with sauce, and then looks up to see Hannibal watching him.

‘I have never wanted to control you, Will,’ the Alpha says, soft and earnest. ‘I have guided you, whispered to you, opened your mind to the possibilities of your true potential but I never once wished to impose restrictions upon you.’

‘You’ve *influenced* me,’ Will says, placing the knife alongside the plate before his hands start shaking. ‘*Coerced* me.’

‘Persuaded you,’ Hannibal corrects, his words a chilling reminder of Bedelia’s. ‘Fostered your dark inspirations.’

Will takes a drink of water and then draws lines through the condensation fogging the tall glass.

‘You broke apart my mind,’ he murmurs, his eyes on the rising bubbles; ‘like the shattered remnants of a teacup, and rearranged them into a more *pleasing* design.’

Hannibal reaches for him and covers one hand with his own. His palm is warm and strong against Will’s knuckles, his scent smooth and soothing, and Will feels his shoulders relax, his breath leaving his body in a soft sigh.

‘I’ve rearranged *nothing*,’ Hannibal promises, his eyes burning with affection for his strong, stubborn mate. ‘I have simply joined you in the bone arena of your skull, with the things you love.’

‘You said something like that to me before,’ Will says, meeting his Alpha’s gaze. ‘The day we met.’

‘I saw your shadow,’ Hannibal says, ‘just as I see it now.’ He lifts Will’s hand and kisses each of his fingertips in turn. They are a killer’s hands, hunter’s hands; mapped with tiny scars of resistance and perseverance, struggle and victory. His favorites are the marks *he* put there, but

he cherishes each and every one for making Will who he is. ‘Even then, I knew you were special, though I had no *idea* you would have such an impact on me.’

‘Do you feel you’ve been more yourself around me?’ Will asks, keeping his voice hushed in respect of the conversation. ‘I’m not sure I can tell.’

Hannibal looks at him, and, as he twines their fingers together, his irises flash crimson.

‘I have never been more vulnerable, than I am with you.’

You could really hurt me, Will. I only pray that you don’t.

***

They make love slowly that night, wrapped in sheets, the bedroom lit only by the flickering flames of the fire. Their hands slide over skin in an endless search for connection; lips meet and press, sharing breath and spit, remembering the taste of a whiskey shared before putting the dogs to bed.

Hannibal lies alongside Will, his hardness held carefully in one of his Omega’s hands, gentle fingers stroking and teasing, piquing his interest without rushing. He reciprocates in kind and then moves his touch down, between Will’s thighs. The Omega spreads his legs for him, tilting his pelvis and humming softly at the feel of Hannibal gathering up his slick. The first digit is a pleasant stretch, his muscles softening quickly, and he surrenders to the feeling of being penetrated. Hannibal kisses him, licking into his mouth in time with the crooking and stroking of his finger, turn desire from a pleasant throb to a persistent ache.

‘If I could stay like this with you,’ Hannibal murmurs, adding a second finger as he strokes the burning ridges of Will’s crest, holding the Omega steady and supporting him as he prepares him for more; ‘I would want for nothing.’

Will nods his agreement and starts to stroke Hannibal faster, trying to match their rhythms even as his brain melts and his focus shrinks.

‘In,’ he whispers, nuzzling Hannibal’s jawline and inhaling the scent of him. ‘I need you inside me.’

‘Stay with me,’ Hannibal replies, rolling on top of the smaller and guiding himself into Will’s eager body. His breath catches and he groans, every inch enveloped in silken heat, squeezed from tip to root. ‘That’s it… There… Keep your eyes open; look at me.’

Will shudders, his mouth dropping open with pleasure. He digs his nails into Hannibal’s shoulders, his own bite marks throbbing from the new nips and rasping licks Hannibal had inflicted upon him. He wraps his legs around Hannibal’s lower back, locking the ankles together to keep his Alpha close, kissing him again as Hannibal begins to move.

‘There,’ he breathes, eyes glowing like two suns with every stroke, pleasure fanned to a bright flame inside him. ‘*There*.’

‘*Aš tave myliu,’* Hannibal purrs, rolling his hips to pull out with a resisting drag and glide back in, again and again. He bows low over his beloved, pressing the words into spit-shined lips as he combs his fingers through Will’s curls. ‘I love you.’

‘I love you, too,’ Will promises, holding one side of Hannibal’s face in his palm, the other sliding through ashen hair before guiding him down as though for another kiss. Then, at the last minute, he ducks his head and grazes his lips and teeth over the burning scar of his Alpha’s crest, licking a hot stripe up his throat and purring at the subsequent shiver.

Hannibal’s eyes water and he gathers Will up in his arms, crushing him tight as he claims his mouth. He sucks Will’s tongue down, gladly drowning in the taste of him, his heart swelling with emotions beyond his comprehension.

Will hangs on tight, battered by the maelstrom of his mate’s feelings. They tear at him and caress him; rage and love and hate and pure, fierce *pride*… His breath leaves him in bursts and he pulls Hannibal down to hide his face in his neck, unsurprised by the tears wetting his partner’s cheeks.

‘I love you,’ he whispers, massaging away the knots in Hannibal’s back and kissing his hair, his face, whatever part of him he can reach. ‘I don’t want to, but I do.’

‘I love your hatred,’ Hannibal confesses, speaking into Will’s skin, moving faster now as climax becomes inevitable. ‘I love hurting you; I love you hurting me. You make me feel *alive*.’

‘Can I ever satisfy you?’ Will asks, withdrawing from the embrace and holding Hannibal still before they both get lost to the chase. ‘Will it ever be enough?’

‘Never,’ Hannibal growls, his irises flooding red and teeth bared. ‘I will *never* get enough of you, Will.’

That’s not what I want to hear, Will thinks, and yet he can’t deny the thrill of Hannibal’s claim. To be endlessly craved, devoured at every opportunity; how many times has he wished for a partner to overwhelm his thoughts and tear everything else away?

You’ve given me everything I want… And nothing I can keep.

He brings Hannibal in for another kiss, chasing the doubt away and replacing it with affection and lust. The current rises, his dark shadow twining with Hannibal’s darkness to shroud them as they move faster, spiraling into bliss.

Will comes with a sharp cry, his body juddering up and off the bed. Hannibal rides his bucks with a hand on his hip and his teeth in his throat, fucking into him two, three more times before he joins him in climax. The room shudders and fades, dark walls and night sky replaced by billowing white curtains and midday sun.

‘Ein Männlein steht im Walde ganz, still und stumm. Es hat von lauter Purpur ein Mäntlein um.’

A child's voice drifts on the breeze, accompanied by laughter and the splash of water. Hannibal closes his eyes, seeking refuge in the crook of Will's neck, focusing on the smell of his blood and the salty tang of his sweat, his knot sealing them together, anchoring him in their mind palace.

'I'm here,' Will breathes, kissing his Alpha's damp brow and cradling him to his chest. 'I'm right here with you.'

'I want to be a good father,' Hannibal whispers, the room warming as his love for Will draws the sun from behind a cloud. 'For our children and for you.'

'Protect them from your darkness,' Will says, rolling his head on the fluffy pillow to look at him. They stretch out as best they can, swathed in sheets that stick to their skin, locked by the knot and satisfied for it. 'Don't let them see your monster.'

Hannibal traces the ragged edges of the bitemark he'd given Will just days before, memorizing the beauty of the damaged flesh.

'I am the monster,' he warns him, but Will shakes his head.

'You don't have to be.' He snuggles impossibly closer, unwilling to have even a millimeter of space between them. 'You can change.'

'Adapt?' Hannibal smiles. 'Am I your evolving design, *mylimasis?'*

'We're each other's design,' Will replies. 'The monster in me; the man in you.'

'What happens when one of us wins?' Hannibal asks, clasping hands with Will again, just as they had at the dinner table. 'What becomes of the other?'

'I don't think it's a case of winning,' Will says thoughtfully, playing with the scars on Hannibal's inner wrists. 'I just think neither of us can lose.'

Hannibal's eyes gleam.

'What happens if we do?'

Will kisses the healed wounds with the reverence of a man at prayer, eliciting another shiver from the Alpha. He nibbles up the ball of Hannibal's thumb and suckles on the tip, only releasing him from between his teeth when the other man's hips begin to move with helpless abandon.

'Whoever *loses*, Dr Lecter,' he says, golden eyes boring into Hannibal's red ones. '*Dies.*'

***

The lamb skull and human bones rattle inside the cooking pot, clanging against the brushed steel with obscene insistence, and Hannibal does his best to drown it out with Mozart's violin concerto no. 5.

He has been boiling the broth since yesterday, and the clank of jaws in the expanding silence of Will's absence sets his nerves on edge. Memories of a snow-choked lodge, a rapid pack of starving Alphas and a little deer, bones bleached of nourishment, bubbling in a copper bathtub…

I'm here… I'm right here with you.

The memory of last night warms him, and Hannibal clamps back down on his fear. He lifts the bones from the pot and strains the water a dozen times through cheesecloth, before cooking it down to barely a sixteenth of its original amount, leaving it thick as glue and perfect for his tableau.

Shimmering blue and silver Peruvian Anchovetas, purchased with Will at the evening market, slide seamlessly into the gelatin, and Hannibal is careful to position each fish within nipping distance of the other, creating a Möbius strip. He layers shredded chicken and vegetables on top and then places the copper mold into the fridge to set. It will be ready to serve at the table this evening, when Jack is here to witness the reveal.

There is a beautiful parallel between the uncovering of this dish and the inevitable unveiling of himself, and Will. When the time comes, they will show Jack the futility of his efforts and then disappear, leaving him defeated and alone.

I am a superior Alpha. And Will is the only suitable counterpart for my strength.

He bakes a "stargazy" pie with sturgeon heads, cheese and wild mushrooms, and sets the table for a truly extravagant zakuski dinner, complete with caviar platter and iced vodka.

When Jack arrives at eight o'clock, Hannibal has dressed in a slate grey suit, somber to reflect his mood, and greets his guest at the door.

'Jack.' He shakes with the other Alpha, noting the burgundy shade to Jack's irises, and the hint of salt in his scent. 'It's good to see you.'

Especially so nervous.

'Hannibal.' Jack smiles and offers a bottle of brandy, which Hannibal accepts with a gracious nod. He takes Jack's hat, coat and gloves, and shows him through to the dining room, where soft music accompanies the waiting meal.

They pass the first course – tricolor caviar and wafer-thin slices of salmon on mini *blinis* – in trivial conversation, the tension mounting but unacknowledged between them, as brittle as the shards of ice on which the vodka rests.

When Hannibal returns with the mold, cold from the fridge and decorated with mixed herbs and baby apples, Jack's eyes light up. Despite his reservations, he is intrigued by the hidden dish.

'Kholodets,' Hannibal says, placing the mirrored platter on the table with a surgeon's precision. 'A Ukrainian dish whose outcome can never be predicted.'

With the barest wiggle on the sides, the copper mold comes away to reveal the anchovetas in all their glory, and Hannibal hums his pleasure at the result.

‘The Latin word “*gelatus*” translates to “frozen”,’ he explains, setting the mold aside as Jack leans in for a closer look. ‘Here, the aspic provides a three-dimensional canvas in which one may stage a scene.’

‘The eternal chase,’ Jack says, nodding his appreciation at the effort and *skill* of such a dish. He’s never seen such clear gelatin before; it must have taken Hannibal hours to perfect.

‘An evocative shape,’ the other Alpha agrees, eyeing the dish one last time before looking at Jack. ‘In that, at a certain point, it becomes unclear who is pursuing whom.’

I’m hunting you, Jack, as you continue to hunt me.

Jack holds the gaze for a long moment and then chuckles, looking down at his clasped hands.

‘Well, in isolation a moment can’t really speak to motive, intent or aftermath,’ he says, watching as Lecter’s carving knife slices with deadly precision through the aspic.

I am pursuing you, and I will win.

‘Aspic is derived from bone,’ Hannibal says, concentrating on creating equal portions. ‘As a life is made from moments.’

Jack clears his throat and adjusts his chair, ready to eat his next course.

‘So, tell me, Hannibal,’ he says, adjusting his plate in its setting. ‘What, er, what *moment* are we in now? You… me… Will?’

Hannibal takes his place across from the other man and sighs.

‘Still harboring doubts about Will?’

Jack chews his lower lip and looks away.

‘Alana Bloom isn’t “harboring” any doubts,’ he replies, not wanting to risk a lie. `‘She’s convinced that he murdered Freddie Lounds.’

Hannibal’s lip thin.

‘And you?’ he asks, cautious for the first time that evening. Where Will is concerned, his emotions are… unreliable.

Jack grimaces.

‘I am convinced of my general lack of trust in other people,’ he replies lightly. Hannibal considers his response, and then says,

‘Lack of trust in other people increases the need for religion.’ He reaches for his vodka. ‘If you can’t rely on others, you have to rely on God.’

Jack joins Hannibal in sipping the drink, which is surprisingly good given his general distaste for the spirit. There’s something else to it – something he doesn’t want to think about too hard.

‘Hmm,’ he purrs, his eyes flickering crimson. ‘I’m relying on myself.’

I trust my instincts, and my strength.

‘And yet, in this moment,’ he adds, picking up a forkful of food. ‘I have to confess that… I don’t know who’s pursuing whom anymore than these fish do.’

I thought I knew Will; I thought I could trust Will… Now I’m not sure. And I don’t know how much of that is you.

Hannibal’s brow creases, just a fraction.

‘Whomever is pursuing whom in this very moment,’ he replies, leaning forwards with a grin. ‘I intend to eat them.’

***

The next day dawns bright and cold, with a fresh layer of snow over Wolf Trap, so Will takes the pack for a long walk before making them a fresh batch of food.

He minces prime cuts of beef, pork and chicken, and seasons it with cod-liver oil and rosemary for their joints, especially in this cold weather. Boiling down beef and sheep bones produces a creamy broth, to which he adds oats and a dozen of next door’s fresh-laid eggs, mixing the food together in a cast-iron pot before portioning out three daily servings.

The leftovers go into the fridge, whilst seven drooling dogs escort him to the front porch, licking their lips and whining as they wait for the Omega to serve them each their allocated amount. Will gets them to wait, watching for signs of submission, and then purrs.

‘Hi guys, eat up.’

He begins serving, a scoop or three depending on their size, and the dogs fall at the bowls, tails wagging as they eat. He’s midway through when tires crunch on the driveway and Will pauses, ladle in hand. Hannibal has patients until noon; he isn’t due until this evening.

When he looks up and sees a black Rolls Royce, with a “Verger 1” license plate, his gut twists.

Today’s the day.

He ushers the dogs inside, adding a handful of liver biscuits to the mix as an apology for leaving them, and then approaches Mason’s driver-slash-bodyguard. A brutal-looking Alpha,

the man is nonetheless respectful when he requests that Will holds out his arms to be frisked, and keeps his hands from straying.

‘Mr Graham.’ Mason’s nasal drawl sends shivers of revulsion down Will’s spine, and it takes all his strength to keep walking towards the Beta. ‘If you’ll join me?’

‘Don’t suppose I have a choice, do I?’ Will replies, and Mason’s eyes shine. He extends his gloved hand towards the open door of the car, a stiff, smug grin on his flabby lips.

‘You don’t wanna miss it,’ the Beta assures him, folding down his coat as he crowds in next to Will. ‘It’s going to be a *killer* show.’

***

Eromenos, the beloved of an *erastes*, has always been used to describe an Omega, younger and lower in political standing than their Alphan partner, and yet equal in strength and passion. As Hannibal waits for his twelve o’clock, an abhorrent little Beta with an unpleasant tendency to arrive late and then sweat through his chinos during every appointment, he begins to sketch one of his favorite childhood pieces, feeling inspired by Will’s recent ferocity.

The positions come from memory; flowing fabric and all faces turned towards a reclining man. Hannibal has just begun to add the shading of biceps and abdominal muscles when the office door opens.

Noel would never barge in unannounced; this must be someone else. Hannibal takes a breath, scenting the air, and listens carefully over the sound of scratching pencil.

Two sets of footsteps, heavy and sure. A rich, meaty tang, thick with hormones.

Alphas…

Carlo narrows his eyes at Dr Lecter, weighing up the slender man’s unassuming posture, fancy clothes and sleekly gelled hair. A fop, just like Mason. This should be an easy job.

He doesn’t smirk; he is a professional, after all.

‘Buongiorno, Dottore,’ he says, by way of greeting. His voice masks the near-silent approach of his younger brother’s approach from the side door behind their prey.

Hannibal notes the third scent, muted but there, and calculates the precise angle at which the surprise attack will occur.

‘Buongiorno,’ he replies, setting his pencil down and palming the scalpel. He keeps his burgundy eyes on the red-ringed irises of the lead Alpha, but his ears prick for the squeak of a loose floorboard to his left.

‘Mr Verger wants your company,’ Carlo continues, stalking further into the room to crowd the weaker Alpha. ‘Please.’ He bares his fangs. ‘Come with us.’

'Preferirei non,' Hannibal replies, his Italian flawless. After all, he'd prefer not to, since it was a request.

The Alpha behind him takes a swing with his club, and Hannibal ducks to avoid the blow. He twists, kicking out backwards and slashing with the scalpel at the same time. The little blade sinks deep into the artery of the man's inner thigh, disabling him, and Hannibal turns his attention on the other two.

They attack in unison but he knocks them both back with punch. Left hook, right hook and then Hannibal drops to the ground, spinning to kick one Alpha's feet out from under him. Both men grunt in pain, but just as Hannibal straightens to catch the lead Alpha by the neck, there is the crackle of electricity.

Carlo presses the taser deep into Lecter's abdomen, pressing the button to give him a full blast. Any other man would have shouted in agony, but Lecter simply drops to his knees, his muscles juddering from the shock.

A sound of pain does, however, come from his brother, and Carlo watches, stricken, as the Alpha pulls the scalpel from his leg with a sharp cry.

'Matteo!'

Blood spurts from the wound, too fast to stop, and Matteo collapses, wailing like a child.

Hannibal's eyes glow like hot coals, satisfied to have at least killed one of his assailants.

'He shouldn't have done that,' he says, and there's a moment of silence before Carlo snarls and jams the taser against his back, shocking him into unconsciousness.

The last thing he sees before his vision fades to black is the lead Alpha crouching beside Matteo, face wet with tears and hands wet with blood.

If only I'd had more knives, he thinks, and then he's gone.

***

When he wakes, it's to the whir of a hoist and the feeling of tight fabric across his chest and shoulders. Something pulls, tugs, grows taut, and then he's being lifted, dangling above a wooden platform. He's being hoisted by a hook attached to the back of a straitjacket. Far from comfortable, the buckles dig into his flesh and his back screams protest at the pressure.

It's cold, and the air stinks of pig shit and Alpha Rut.

Hannibal breathes slowly, controlling his heartbeat and his own reactions to the situation. He can see Carlo at the control; the Alpha's face is etched with fury and grief. When the other man stalks closer to rip the expensive brogues and socks from his feet, Hannibal sees the rusty smears of stale blood on him.

Carlo reveals the captive Alpha's tender soles and pink toes, smirking at him from under the brim of his hat as the hanging man looks around at his hopeless situation.

'Buona sera, Dottore,' he says, voice rasping with a growl.

Hannibal, swaying slightly in the breeze leaking through the slats of the barn walls, quirks an eyebrow and moves only his eyes to track the other Alpha.

'You are Sardinian,' he says, sounding pleasantly surprised. 'If you have to be kidnapped for ransom, a wealthy Italian will tell you it's better to fall into the hands of the Sards.'

As he talks, the movement takes him away from the other man, and then back, like a clock pendulum.

Carlo nods his agreement, and then pulls a folding knife from his jacket pocket.

Hannibal sighs.

'And you're a professional revenger, as well, I suspect.'

'With you,' Carlo replies, thumbing the ivory handle, 'it is personal, now.' He flicks it open, the blade winking in the light of forensic lamps, and Hannibal's lips tug into a half-smile.

'I take it Matteo didn't make it.' He frowns thoughtfully. 'Did he foul himself?' As he swings back around to face Carlo again, he feels his eyes flash crimson as he adds a cruel, 'I imagine he smells worse than *you* by now.'

Carlo's eyes blaze with Rutting fury and he advances with the knife held high. Hannibal locks eyes with him, goading him to try it, watching and waiting for the perfect time to –

'Kill him and you will get no money!'

Mason Verger's voice rings out, but Carlo continues to lift his knife to Dr Lecter's throat. The Beta scrabbles up the last step to the platform, his heart racing.

'Carlo! Carlo!' Mason grabs the Alpha by the arm and pushes him away, leaving Dr Lecter to swing like a slab of meat and distracting him from his prey.

Hannibal is about to speak when a new scent catches his attention. He looks behind Mason, to the young man following a few steps behind the Beta, and his heart lodges in his throat.

Will.

Will moves slowly and deliberately, golden eyes locked onto his Alphan mate, noting with cold satisfaction the strain in Hannibal's jaw and the thick ring of red around his eyes. He is in pain, and he is worried.

Good.

The second man from the office, Carlo's other brother, finishes the ensemble, blocking the stairs with his bulk and glaring with open hatred at Hannibal.

Mason, satisfied that he has re-established control over the situation, and of Carlo, clasps his leather gloved hands together and looks Dr Lecter up and down. He turns from Alpha to Omega and barks a laugh, wiggling his fingers at Hannibal's bare feet.

'*Those* little piggies are gonna go "eeee-eeee-eeee-eeeeee!" *All* the way home.' He cackles again, and then clears his throat. 'The swine may be *shy* with starting with the toes,' he explains, manhandling Lecter to he can look up into his irritatingly passive face and scare the shit out of him with what's about to happen.

Maybe the man is an imbecile. Maybe he thinks his precious *Omega* will save him. The idiot doesn't even realize the straitjacket is his *mate's* idea.

'So, we need to *encourage* them…' He turns and smirks at Carlo, adding in an offensively bad Italian accent, 'With'a little'a sauce, eh?'

Carlo doesn't acknowledge him; he just growls like a dog at Lecter. Mason rolls his eyes and turns back to his former psychiatrist.

'We're gonna cut your throat.'

'*Padrone*.' When Carlo speaks, his low voice carries the resonance and weight of a strong Alpha, and Mason has no choice but to stop still and listen. 'He killed Matteo.'

If you do not allow me my revenge, I will kill you. The message, unspoken, is heard loud and clear, regardless, and Mason can only just suppress a shiver. To cover it, he gives an exaggerated shrug and gestures with his hands.

'We can give Matteo's family *Dottoroni's*… I don't know, *cajones* for comfort.' He waggles his eyebrows. 'Capisce?'

Carlo considers for a moment and then holds out the knife. Mason watches, worried, but the Alpha walks closer and hands it to him, in front of Lecter. He doesn't try to strike; doesn't disobey.

Everything is going to plan.

'He likes to cut low,' Carlo warns, and Hannibal quirks an eyebrow at Will, his eyes dancing with mirth. He had no choice, after all; he was being attacked.

Will's own eyes gleam, and Hannibal smells the arousal coming off him in waves. Heat spreads from his belly to his groin, out through his limbs until his very scalp tingles, and his heart skips a beat as a purr rattle in his throat.

I saw an opportunity to feel alive.

This is Will's fantasy, made flesh.

He looks at Mason, excitedly expectant.

Mason, naïve to the true meaning of this encounter, waggles the knife at Lecter's face.

‘You are an *odd* psychiatrist,’ he muses. ‘We could’ve had some good, funny times together.’ He spits a laugh. ‘It’s a damn shame!’ Shaking his head, he strides up to Will and slaps the knife into his hand. ‘I’ve muzzled the dog,’ he explains, ‘Now, it’s time for you to… put him down.’

Will considers the weight of the handle, the feel of it in his palm. He adjusts his grip, getting comfortable with the ivory, and then looks up at his mate.

Whoever loses, dies.

In his fantasy, he slashed his Alpha’s jugular and blood soaked him. He wants to feel that again. He wants to *kill*, to maul and maim and hurt and make Hannibal lose his precious control just like he did when they were making love.

Hannibal watches Will, outwardly calm but internally afire with passion as his beloved’s dark shadow takes control and brings him closer. He sees Will cock his head, his eyes blazing, and then feels the cold edge of the blade against the raised scar of his Alphan crest.

‘Don’t bleed him out!’ Mason yelps, jumping forwards to stop him when Will holds the knife across Lecter’s throat. ‘Just…’ He growls at the Omega’s stupidity. ‘Just a little *nick!* Just enough to give the pigs a taste!’

Will narrows his eyes, his attention locked onto Hannibal. He presses just a little harder, feeling the shiver of nervous anticipation through their bond, smelling Hannibal’s arousal at the helplessness of his situation…

He sees the *trust* and respect in his Alpha’s eyes, and his decision is made.

Not like this.

Mason’s heart stops and he lunges forward in horror as the Omega, the filthy fucking *Omega*, spins Lecter around and slashes the buckles, freeing the Alpha.

‘Carlo!’

It happens at once. Will hears the whistle of air and then pain explodes across the back of his skull, shooting colors across his vision. Carlo snarls as he slams the butt of his pistol across the traitor’s head, splitting the skin of his temple and spilling blood down his face.

The baby!

It’s his only thought as his world tilts. Will’s legs go out from under him and he falls, twisting to the side in a last effort to protect his stomach. He lands on his shoulder, his spinning brain only dully registering another shock of pain.

Shapes blur together, light fading to blackness amidst sounds of slaughter and the bitter, copper tang of blood. He can’t see… He can’t see anything.

Hannibal…

***

He wakes alone, stiff with cold and hurting everywhere. His head throbs in time to his heartbeat and Will licks his lips to check for vomit.

Just unconscious. That's good. He touches his belly, brow creasing at the pang of worry for his fetus, but then the silence of the barn drags him back to what happened just before he passed out.

Hannibal.

He staggers to his feet, his lips tingling. The drying blood pulls at his hair but it's nothing compared to the great swathes of red splashed about the platform.

Part-dried, still sticky where it's pooled… He's been unconscious for at least an hour, probably two.

Hannibal, where are you?

He turns a circle, clumsy on heavy feet, and then lurches for the hoist controller. Cogs whir and the pulley winds the metal wires back in, lifting whatever – *whoever* – is inside the pit with the pigs.

I didn't mean it… It was a fantasy, just a sick, stupid fantasy.

The hogs scream protest, fighting to keep their food, and bile scratches Will's throat as he watches the hook appear, sunk deep into the back of a navy jacket.

I wanted them to hurt you… Tear you apart and eat you as you flayed my mind open…

The broken, bloodied body of Carlo Deogracias appears, chunks of flesh missing from his torso and thigh bones split by grinding molars. His face still holds traces of the agony of his dying, his eyes red with terror, but all that remains of his arms and legs are mangled stumps and strips of flesh.

Relief robs him of his remaining strength and Will leans against the rail for support, barely able to breathe.

He's alive. Hannibal's alive.

He just doesn't know *where*.

***

Sweat gathers in a single bead on Mason's forehead, quivering in the cool air, and then flows down his cheek to splash like a tear onto his shirt collar.

He groans, coming back to consciousness in a haze of sickness and pain. He's… somewhere… Nowhere… *Everywhere*...

Strong hands hold him steady, forcing his head upright. Mason squints, trying to see, and then feels a gas mask over his face, covering his mouth and nose.

There's a smell, acrid and unpleasant, and then –

Fuck.

Hannibal presses the button to aerosolize the mix of psychotropic drugs in the inhaler, forcing the powder up into Mason Verger's nose. For the second time since kidnapping him from the estate, the drugs hit his bloodstream and shoot right up to his brain.

The Alpha sits back on his haunches and watches, satisfied, as the Beta's pupils explode, filling his irises with black.

Capillaries burst. His heart races. Blood races and adrenaline spikes. He's flying. Floating. Spinning, dancing, falling, sucking into oblivion… He's everything and nothing, so big he doesn't fit into the universe and so small he's about to shrink out of his *clothes*.

'*Wow!'* Mason cackles, feeling himself drooling and utterly incapable of stopping it. Is he even real? Is his body even real? What is skin, anyway? What is flesh and blood and bone and tears?

From very, very far away, Dr Lecter speaks, his voice echoing through the vacuum of time and space.

'Mason, I must ask you to be quiet.'

'Oh…' Mason giggles, and presses a pudgy little finger to his numb lips. '*Ssssh, sssh!'*

'You'll frighten the animals,' Hannibal explains, setting the equipment aside, out of the way.

'*Ohhh*…' His vision shakes, and Mason reaches blindly for the pigs in front of him, unable to reach because he's not actually sure he's *moved*… 'Piggy, piggy, piggy… Here, piggy, piggy!'

Hannibal cups Mason's sweating head again, checking his pulse and opening his eyes to see the fixation of his pupils. Mason pants another laugh, lost to madness.

'*What* have you given me?' he gasps, staring in awe at Dr Lecter. The Alpha's eyes flash from red to gold to black to blue to all the colors of the rainbow. Sparks fly around him as he shakes in and out of focus, in and out, back and forth, round and round and round and round and –

'A variety of psychedelic compounds,' Hannibal replies, satisfied with the effects. 'Psychedelic, so named from the Greek for "mind-revealing".'

As the Alpha speaks, his expression changes from serious to playful, and Mason is sure, *sure* that he waggles his fingers and composes in thin air, grinning like a schoolboy. And then Lecter moves away and Mason tries to clear his throat, his heart racing and muscles

spasming. There's a livewire under his skin, but he has no control over himself. He's a puppet, a toy, a *boy*.

'*You* need to write me a *prescription* for this, Doctor.' He laughs again, his ears filled with the ringing, clanging music of his Middle Eastern playlist, his eyes assaulted by a barrage of shapes and colors, too bright and sharp for reality.

Hannibal purrs, wondering how the low rumble sounds to the hallucinating Beta.

'Patients rhapsodize about the life-changing insights they achieve,' he says, and Mason shudders, the blood draining from his face.

'I am enchanted and *terrified*,' he confesses, watching with dawning horror as Dr Lecter stands up, taller than any Alpha before him, taller than he has any right to be, pushing the very ceiling of the world away from him, talking all the while but his voice so distorted and so very, very far away…

'The world presents itself as a cacophony of sights, sounds, smells and recollections,' Hannibal continues, gazing down at the raptured man.

Mason stares, his mouth slack and chest heaving. Dr Lecter's head jerks, whips back and forth and blurs before becoming a *pig's* head, a boar's head, with ivory tusks and dark, cruel eyes…

He might die of fear, right now.

And then, somehow, Lecter is right in his face again, staring so deep into his eyes that he's *inside him*, in his mind, controlling him, *owning* him…

This must be how Omegas feel.

'I want you to recall your education in stockyards and slaughterhouses,' Hannibal says, holding out Mason's little folding knife, handle first. 'Show me how Papa would check the depth of a pig's fat.'

The world erupts and Mason spills a mouthful of fresh drool down his chin as he giggles. He lunges forwards, reaching for the hog by his feet.

'Here, piggy, piggy, piggy!'

'No,' Hannibal corrects, stopping him and helping him to sit up straight again. 'Mason, no…' He pushes him back into the soft armchair, and tilts Mason's head up with a finger under his damp chin. 'Show me,' he instructs, 'on *you*.'

And Mason realizes, he *understands*. Dr Lecter wants him to stab *himself*. To check his *own* flesh. He thinks about it for a second and then shrugs, barking out one last hoarse laugh.

Why not? It's not real, anyway. Nothing's real, unless he says so.

What's the worst that can happen?

***

Will's lungs are burning and his head aches by the time he arrives home. The Verger estate, whilst uncomfortably close, is still a good three-hour trek away, and the snow is calf-deep in most places. His jeans are caked with powder and his nose is numb with cold by the time his farmhouse comes into view. What greets him, though, are dark windows and an empty driveway.

Disappointment is a kick in the gut, followed swiftly by churning worry.

Hannibal isn't here.

Will keeps walking, emerging from the woods where Randall had lain in wait to attack him, frowning when he realizes Winston is sat, waiting for him, on the porch. The collie-cross sits in the shadows, balefully watching his Omega approach.

'Hey, Winston.' Will calls to him softly, scanning the surrounding area for danger before bending to fuss him. 'Where's everyone else?'

He glances up, his eyes flashing gold when he sees the porch door open. Hannibal's scent hangs in the air; fresh and thick with Rut.

Alpha.

He opens the front door, left unlocked, and steps inside. Winston follows him, whining softly at everything that's wrong with his home.

The house is shrouded in darkness, shadows pooling in the corners and clinging to the ceiling. The only light is the silver glow of the moon filtering through the windows, which lends an eerie quality to the looming furniture. A prickle of apprehension runs down Will's spine and all the fine hairs stand on end, his flesh pebbling at the coppery smell of blood.

What the hell happened?

Mason's voice, when he speaks from the living area, chills him to the core.

'I just *love* your dogs.' The Beta holds out a strip of bloody flesh, handing it to the dogs gathered around him. 'How is that?' he croons, smearing red across their fur when he pats their heads. 'Is that good? Do you want another piece? How about *you?* Good girl. Ah, sit, *sit…'*

Not my dogs; not my family.

Will's heart stumbles, skipping a beat and then pumping ice through his veins.

'Mason,' he whispers, terror snatching his voice.

'I adopted some dogs from the shelter,' Mason says, his attention on Will's pack as he speaks. 'Two dogs, that were friends. I had them in a cage together with no food and fresh water.'

Dolly licks her lips, her white poodle fur stained with blood. '*One* of them died hungry. The other had a warm meal.'

The Beta chuckles and waves the little knife around. Where the blade remains clean, it glints in the moonlight.

'*I* should have put you in a cage with Dr Lecter,' he continues, pointing at Will. 'I'm *curious* what would have happened.'

Another strip of meat goes to the dogs, spattering blood everywhere.

'What are you feeding my dogs?' Will asks quietly, his mind foggy from the blow, his stomach roiling with disgust.

Please, please don't be –

Mason lifts his head and the moonlight throws his ruined face into sharp relief. Exposed teeth, grinning in his skull, his cheeks sliced away, chin split apart and chunks missing.

'Hah!' The laughter makes fresh blood spill from the severed capillaries. 'Just me!'

He cackles, his teeth clacking and muscles gleaming, blood pouring everywhere and the dogs lapping up the droplets from the floorboards.

This is so… so fucked up.

'Sit,' Mason says, returning to the dogs all gathered around him, gesturing like a conductor with the little knife. '*Sit*.'

Hannibal.

Will can sense his Alpha behind him, even before his scent reaches him. He turns his head, looking back over his shoulder, and relief robs him of his voice at the sight of his mate, whole and healthy and *alive*, stood just beside him.

You're not alone in that darkness, Will. I'm standing right beside you.

The only indication of a struggle on Hannibal's part is the dried blood from a cut across his eyebrow, and it's nothing compared to the damage he inflicted on Carlo and his brother. Mason, it could be argued, has inflicted all the damage on himself.

Will reaches for him and they twine their fingers together; a simple touch but a lifeline in the spiraling chaos. Relief is a warm fire in Will's heart, filling his belly with certainty, and he feels the first throb of arousal at seeing his mate, strong and vicious, look down with an undisguised sneer at the sniveling Beta before them.

When Hannibal speaks, however, his voice betrays nothing of the disgust he feels. Now that he has won, he remains objective and clinical about his prey.

‘What Mason is experiencing isn’t restricted to reality,’ he explains, and, as he speaks, Mason imagines him pacing back and forth with his hog’s head, his voice echoing up out of the chambers of his lungs. ‘So, reality has to be forced to adapt.’

We adapt, we evolve, or we die.

‘He fed his *face* to my dogs,’ Will growls, following as Hannibal moves away from him.

‘He broadened their palettes,’ Hannibal replies, lifting both eyebrows in challenge. ‘As I broadened yours.’

They both glance at Mason, keeping an eye on him as he continues to saw away at his cheeks, lounging in the armchair by the fireplace and watched, eagerly, by the dogs.

Hannibal steps closer to Will, casting him into shadow.

‘Murder or mercy?’

Will sighs and shakes his head.

‘There is no *mercy*,’ he says wearily. ‘We *make* mercy.’ He looks over at Mason, who blithely inspects a slice of skin peeled from his jawline, and his gaze turns steely. ‘We manufacture it in the parts that have overgrown our basic reptile brain.’

It’s a social construct, used to keep us in line. You and I have evolved beyond that.

‘Then, there is no murder,’ Hannibal says, speaking as though they are alone in his office, in another one of their sessions. ‘We make murder, too. It matters only to us.’

Predators do not murder their prey; they do what comes naturally.

Will tilts his head into a nod, accepting the logic of the argument, and Hannibal’s eyes glow burgundy.

‘You know too well, you possess *all* the elements to make murder,’ Hannibal continues. ‘Perhaps mercy too, but murder you understand *uncomfortably* well.’

It’s what I love most about you. The duality of your mind. You want to murder me, yet you spare me. Over and over, an endless dance.

Will considers Hannibal; considers the monster in the person-suit before him. His mate. The father of his child…

Before he can speak, however, Mason interrupts them.

‘I’m *hungry*,’ he announces, waving his bloody arms around. Hannibal tuts at the disruption and turns to him, as one might turn to an errant child.

‘Eat your nose, then,’ he says, and Mason pauses, blinking in surprise at such a *genius* idea.

‘Eat my… eat my *nose…?’* He pokes the fleshy nub sitting above his exposed teeth. Will looks round, one eyebrow arched in disdain, and watches as the Beta shrugs and cuts off the cartilage tip of his own nose.

Blood pours down his face and he sniffs. Then, with a wet, smacking sound, he pops his own flesh into his mouth and chews, as loud and obnoxious as ever.

When he’s swallowed, he makes a show of sucking on his fingers, though it only serves to smear more blood everywhere, and then hums.

‘I have a *taste* and consistency that’s *similar* to that of a chicken gizzard,’ he declares, and Hannibal turns his attention back to Will.

‘Taste is housed in parts of the mind that precedes pity,’ he explains. Then, with a wink, he adds, ‘Pity has no place at the table.’

Mason burps.

‘I’m full of myself,’ he says, and then laughs at his own joke. ‘Full of myself!’

Will shakes his head.

‘I’m not gonna kill him,’ he says softly, almost apologetically.

‘He was going to feed you to his pigs,’ Hannibal says, trying to persuade him. ‘After he fed them me.’ He turns to the Beta. ‘Weren’t you, Mason?’

Mason puts a hand across his eyes in dramatic shame, his mouth carved into a permanent grin.

‘I *was*,’ he admits, but Will shakes his head again and steps closer to Hannibal.

‘He’s *your* patient, *Doctor*,’ he says, adding a rasping purr to his voice, glancing up through his lashes with gold-flecked eyes. ‘You do what you think is best for him.’

As Mason begins to hum to himself, Hannibal graces his Omega with a knowing grin. He moves to the Beta, stepping up behind him and positioning his hands carefully on either side of Mason’s slimy, exposed face.

A move to the left, followed by a sharp twist to the right and Mason’s neck crunches, vertebrae severed irreparably. The humming stops abruptly and Hannibal presses his fingers to the Beta’s throat, checking for a pulse.

Weak, but there. After so many hours of blood loss and shock, it is only the combination of drugs keeping him alive.

He positions Mason’s head back so that he could be sleeping, baring his ruined face to the ceiling for all to see. Wipes his hands on the sleeves of Mason’s shirt and then strides into the kitchen to wash them thoroughly.

‘Is he dead?’ Will asks, following after him. Hannibal soaps his palms and fingers, getting under his nails and into the creases of his knuckles with a surgeon’s precision. It is only after he rinses and is drying them on a towel that he answers.

‘No.’ He looks at him. ‘No murder, no mercy. Mason is simply as ugly on the outside, now, as he is within.’

Will nods, accepting the reasoning.

‘Why here?’ he asks, crossing his arms and leaning on the kitchen doorframe. ‘Why my house?’

‘For convenience,’ Hannibal replies, folding the towel and putting it away. ‘There would have been too many security cameras at the Verger estate, and I was in no fit state to drive across town. Besides,’ he adds, his eyes sparkling when he sees that Will is about to argue with him. ‘I wanted you to find me. I wanted to see what you would do.’

‘You were curious,’ Will says, taking a step closer to the other man. ‘You’ve always been ruled by your curiosity.’

‘As you have always been ruled by your empathy.’ Hannibal takes Will into his arms, nuzzling his forehead and then checking the lump on the back of his head, even as Will inspects the cut on his eyebrow.

‘This needs stitching,’ the Omega murmurs, black rage rising inside him at the idea of someone, *anyone* but *him*, wounding his Alpha. He draws Hannibal’s head down and kisses the scab, licking Hannibal’s salty blood to begin cleaning and healing the injury.

‘Will…’ Hannibal folds into the embrace, wrapping his arms around the smaller man’s back and hugging him close. He submits to the touch, purring softly to encourage Will’s tenderness as sharp teeth nip away at dried blood, catching on his skin.

‘I was tempted to slit your throat,’ Will confesses, taking Hannibal by the hand and leading him to the breakfast counter. He stays close, pressing his body up against the other man’s as he reaches for the first aid kit, and rummages inside for surgical thread and a needle. ‘I wanted to.’

‘I know,’ Hannibal breathes, holding very still as Will dabs his cut with iodine. Pain flares, bright in the corner of his mind, but it is merely a flicker of sensation within the halls of his mind palace; nothing more than the guttering of a candle flame. ‘A part of *me* wanted you to.’

‘You don’t want me to kill you,’ Will says, squeezing the flesh together and piercing the skin with the needle, dragging the thread through to seal it shut. ‘You enjoy living too much.’

‘I do,’ Hannibal agrees, his hands on his Will’s hips, steadying him as the Omega works. ‘I particularly enjoying living with *you*.’

Will hums. He dabs blood from Hannibal's forehead and knots the thread before snipping it. A simple stitch, nothing fancy; one of the first medical things he'd learnt to do once he'd started fishing. He's slit his thumbs open dozens of times as a boy, and trips to the Emergency Room were a luxury his father could seldom afford.

'What are we going to do about Mason?' Will asks, packing his kit away and washing his hands. He idly thinks that he should have washed them before sewing up his lover, but then, if Hannibal gets an infection it will serve the bastard right.

Hannibal returns the kit to the cupboard before rolling up his shirt sleeves.

'We should return him to the Verger estate,' he says calmly. 'Margot will be home from hospital soon; she'll be expecting him.'

Will looks back over his shoulder, an eyebrow arched.

'You want her to come home from having a forced abortion and hysterectomy to find her brother like *that?'* he asks, disbelief etched into every line of his face.

Hannibal's eyes glint.

'No doubt she will find it *therapeutic* to see her abuser in such a compromising position,' he replies. 'After all, how often have you fantasized about seeing me vulnerable? Wounded? Disfigured?'

'Never disfigured,' Will says, shaking his head. 'Dismembered, perhaps, but, no matter how hard I try, I can't summon an image of you with your face missing.'

Hannibal takes the towel and dries Will's hands for him, lifting each one to his mouth and kissing the knuckles.

'I'm grateful for that,' he says warmly. 'Your imagination knows no bounds, *mylimasis;* I can only guess at the fate you have in store for me.'

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Three days later, Jack is granted an audience with Will and Hannibal's latest victim.

Mason Verger has been in intensive care for the last forty-eight hours, begrudgingly released to his estate only at his insistence and surrounded by a team of highly trained medics.

His face is ruined; his spinal cord broken beyond repair. He will never walk again, can barely swallow and, with his lips gone and cheek muscles sliced off, his ability to eat is limited.

The playroom has been converted into Mason's private bedroom, with easy access for his electric wheelchair, when he has the strength to leave the bed.

Jack drapes his coat over his arm as he waits for Mason to be ready; he stands at the edge of the viewing glass to the underfloor fish tank, watching as a giant eel swims by. The air stinks of antiseptic, old blood and cauterized flesh.

‘Good afternoon,’ Mason calls, his voice even more nasal than before, and muffled by the plastic mask holding his face together. ‘Agent Crawford?’

‘Yes,’ Jack replies, stepping away from the tank. ‘Good afternoon, Mr Verger.’ He nods again to the eel. ‘What a *magnificent* creature.’

‘Oh, thank you,’ Mason purrs, blue eyes glazed from the cocktail of pain meds and antibiotics the doctors have pumped him with, body entirely numb from both the paralysis and enough lidocaine to fell a bull elephant. ‘It’s a *muraena kidako*. Its common name is, er,’ he chuckles; ‘“brutal moray”. Would you like to see why?’

Jack turns away from the moray eel and looks over to the Beta lying, broken and bloodied, in his curtained bed.

‘No, thank you.’ His eyes flicker red at the state of the wretched creature who went up against Hannibal Lecter and lost. ‘I don’t want to take up too much of your time, Mr Verger.’

He glances around the room, at all the security cameras pointed at him and the various monitors blipping to confirm their patient’s continued existence.

‘I realize you probably need to get your rest, but I would like to ask you just a few questions about… what happened to you.’

Mason’s eyes are the only thing to move; he is half-lying in bed, propped as vertical as is safe with a dozen cushions behind his broken back. His head in held in a metal frame, the screws pressed tight to his skull. The plastic mask secures the gauze to his ruined face and feeds oxygen to him through tiny tubes built into the structure. Since cutting off and eating the tip of his nose, Mason struggles to breathe by himself.

‘Took a tumble in the pig pen,’ Mason replies, the lie flowing past lipless teeth as easy as ever. ‘Broke my neck. *Embarrassing*, really.’ He tuts. ‘Clumsy, clumsy, *clumsy*.’

Dr Lecter was clumsy when he left me alive. Will Graham was clumsy when he didn’t kill me afterwards. They’ll pay for that mistake.

‘If my sister hadn’t *found* me,’ he continues, ‘the pigs would have eaten more than my face.’

Jack narrows his eyes, leaning down in an attempt to see past the mask.

‘*Pigs* did this to you?’ he asks, openly skeptical.

‘Oh yes,’ Mason says. ‘The *pigs* certainly did.’

Dr Lecter and his Omega are pigs, no doubt; and I’m going to make them my bacon, some day.

Jack sucks his teeth and sighs.

‘Mr Verger, you are a patient of Dr Hannibal Lecter; isn’t that right?’

‘Dr Lecter, yes, yes,’ Mason agrees, and Jack nods.

‘Have you ever seen or met Dr Lecter’s mate? An Omega called Will Graham?’

Mason frowns, his eyebrows the only part of his face he can still move.

‘Will Graham,’ he muses. ‘… The Omega that *didn’t* kill all those people? *That* Will Graham?’

‘Yes,’ Jack says, but Mason sighs.

‘Can’t say that I’ve had the pleasure,’ he replies. Jack leans in, ready to try one more tactic. The situation is bizarre and macabre, and there’s more here than meets the eye. He just needs proof.

‘Do you find that Dr Lecter’s therapy has been… *helpful* to you?’ he asks, wondering if this, perhaps, is the result of an attack gone wrong.

‘I’ve benefited *greatly* from Dr Lecter’s therapy,’ Mason says, thinking of how narrow his mind has now become, how focused on one single purpose he now is. He was like a puppy before; flying off in different directions, pursuing whatever sadistic pleasure took his fancy. Now, all he wants to do is torture and kill Dr Lecter and his mate. ‘I’m *still* benefitting from it. I will *always* be grateful for how he’s *helped* me.’

His eyes gleam with the same mad light as before, made brighter for all the drugs.

‘I only hope that I may repay *him*, one day.’

I’ll do to him ten times worse than anything he’s done to me. I’ll make him wish he were dead, and then keep him alive just a little bit longer.

‘Now,’ he adds, aware of a heaviness to his eyelids as the nurses increase his morphine. ‘If you don’t mind; I am rather tired.’

Jack bites back a growl. He’ll get no help here; the truth of what happened to Mason will remain a secret to him.

‘Thank you for your time, Mr Verger.’

As he walks away, he spots a young Omegan woman entering the room. Her brown hair is coiled into a bun at the nape of her neck and her lips are painted red to match her blazer. About her throat gleams a gold Omegan collar, cut like a necklace but sealed with a lock.

She looks both beautiful and deadly, like a viper coiled to strike.

Mason’s heart monitor registers a blip when he sees his sister. To be so vulnerable around her, after everything he put her through…

He only hopes she accepts the chocolate.

‘Is it time to talk about what *Margot* wants?’

Hatred squeezes like a vice around Margot’s heart, and she bares her fangs at her brother.

‘What Margot *wants*,’ she says, speaking deliberately carefully so as not to snarl the words; ‘is to take care of you, Mason… *dear*.’ Her irises flood with gold. ‘Just as *you* took care of *me*.’

I’m going to make your life hell.

***

The sketch is nearly complete. Hannibal adds the last shading to the rounded shoulder of Achilles, the mighty Grecian Alpha who slew Hector of Troy, and a great sense of peace settles over him. Satisfaction at producing such beauty from a blank sheet of paper. Satisfaction at slaying his own enemy, and having Will by his side.

As though summoned, his Omega rises from the armchair, where he’s been reading for the last few hours. Hannibal had three patients this morning, and Will had brought them a lunch to share, staying ever since to give the Alpha some peace from the dogs crowding his townhouse.

At the other man’s approach, Hannibal glances up, showing Will the finished piece. Will, dressed in navy slacks and a blue shirt, nods his praise at the skill of his mate, and Hannibal’s eyes flicker red with pleasure.

‘Achilles,’ he says, touching up the linework here and there. ‘Lamenting the death of Patroclus. Whenever he’s mentioned in *The Iliad*, Patroclus seems to be defined by his empathy.’

I hope my empathy doesn’t get me killed, Will thinks, staring down at the drawing.

‘He became Achilles on the field of war,’ he murmurs, recalling the tale. ‘He died for him there, wearing his armor.’

I haven’t become you; I don’t wear the same person-suit you do. But I might die for you, if the circumstances were right.

‘He did,’ Hannibal agrees. ‘Hiding and revealing identity is a constant theme throughout the Greek epics.’

‘As are battle-tested relationships,’ Will replies, and they both know neither of them are talking about *The Iliad*.

Hannibal sets his pencil down and pushes the paper away from him. It is done.

‘Achilles wished all Greeks would die,’ he says, gazing into nothing as he considers the words he speaks. ‘So that he and Patroclus could conquer Troy alone.’

I want to conquer the world with you, my love.

Will turns his gaze to him, eyes dancing gold in the light of the fire. His eyes track the cut on the Alpha's eyebrow, almost healed now from tender licks every night before bed, and a faint bruise over Hannibal's nose where Carlo's fist had made contact. The swelling had only become visible the next morning, and Will had wrapped ice cubes in a cloth for him.

Hannibal's lips quirk into a smile.

'It took divine intervention to bring them down.'

Who among men can hope to stop us, mylimasis?

Will can feel the confidence thrumming through their bond, and his belly squirms with excitement. Even as it does, he feels a twinge of worry, and it feels like the flutter of his baby's heart. He steps closer to Hannibal, moving around the desk as if to stand beside him.

'This isn't sustainable,' he says quietly, continuing past his Alpha to stare into the flames at the hearth. 'We're going to get caught.'

Hannibal sits back in his chair with a sigh, tapping the sharp end of his pencil on the smudged fingertips of his other hand.

'Jack already suspects you killed Freddie Lounds,' he admits, revealing his discussion with the Alpha from their dinner together.

Will looks back over his shoulder at him, his face lit by fire but his body in darkness.

'If Jack told you he suspects me, that means he suspects *you*,' he warns, and Hannibal nods.

'I know.'

Will pauses, and then he casts the last line into the water. The final bait; too tempting to resist.

'You should give him what he wants,' he says, careful not to look at his mate when he says it. Dares him to prove himself the superior Alpha.

'Give him the Chesapeake Ripper,' Hannibal muses, and Will's eyes flash gold in victory of the confession.

'Allow him closure,' he urges, his voice hushed with excitement. He's so close… *so* close to pushing Hannibal into position… Just another move, one more play and they'll be at checkmate. It'll all come crashing down. 'Reveal yourself,' he continues, watching the sharp outline of Hannibal's face, wondering at the hooded eyes and closed lips. What is his mate thinking? He can't read his thoughts; even now, Hannibal remains a mystery to him. 'You've taunted him for long enough. Let him see you with clear eyes.'

Hannibal glances up at him, his irises the color of blood.

'Jack has become my friend,' he says, surprised by the sadness of the sentiment. He sighs through his nose, weighing his decision. 'I suppose… I owe him the truth.'

He turns back to his drawing, setting the graphite back to the paper.

It needs a little more work.

Mizumono

Chapter Summary

Jack devises a plan to apprehend Hannibal, while Hannibal prepares for his departure with his family. Will makes his decision, which results in devastating consequences.

Chapter Notes

I changed Bella Crawford from being an Alpha to an Omega – Jack is more likely to bond an Omega and I wanted to show someone strong and regal as an Omega, to give a full spectrum of personalities.

Also, this chapter was SO difficult to write!!! I had to stop and have a cry about a thousand times!!! They're both so hurt and it's just such an amazing performance by both actors, to really see the emotion in their eyes and the unspoken words in the silence between sentences… Aaargh! Amazing!

Anyway, it's not as long as normal - apologies, I didn't want to labour over something so sad for too long. I'd much rather crack on with S3 and reunite the boys. So, yeah, here we go...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mizumono

Ink saturates the parchment like blood on snow. It flows thickly from the nib of the fountain pen, glistening in a series of eerily perfect flourishes.

Dr Hannibal Lecter and Mr Will Graham request the pleasure of your company for dinner, this Friday at 8pm.

Hannibal smiles, his scent hot with anticipation. He sets the letter aside to dry and retrieves a matching envelope, filling the front of it with Jack Crawford's name. The calligraphy is as perfect as that of the invite, distinctive to his hand alone.

Will asked him to reveal himself. Give Jack the Chesapeake Ripper… A moment of truth; the revealing of secrets.

He will tell him, and then he will kill him, with Will by his side.

It's all going to plan.

***

The day passes slowly, filled with patients utterly unsuspecting that their psychiatrist is about to leave the country. Hannibal keeps an eye on the clock, willing away the hours until 7pm.

Finally, after an eternity of waiting for his beloved, the Omega arrives. Will is Hannibal's last patient of the day, though their sessions have long been an incongruous blend of therapy and recreation; something they have both come to cherish.

'I made dinner reservations at *Cecconi's*,' the other man says, foregoing social politeness for a brusque entrance and flat announcement. 'I want to try their duck ragù and brandied-pear sorbet.'

'Not at the same time, I hope,' Hannibal teases, approaching from his desk. He gives Will a quick kiss and then closes the door, taking his coat from him and hanging it beside his own, just as he always does. It smells of cold air and dog fur; Will has walked the pack this afternoon, stopping at a bakery for something sweet on his way home.

The cravings are good; they suggest a healthy pregnancy. His body is beginning to show the first signs, as well. His belly, hidden behind a thick shirt and ugly trousers, is nonetheless softer than before, and he holds his hands near it in an instinctively protective stance. Hannibal admires his side profile, hanging back to watch him as the other man familiarizes himself with the scents and sights of the office again.

He is perfect.

'I might,' Will replies, speaking absently as he notices the handwritten invitation sitting on Hannibal's desk. 'Just to annoy you… What's this?'

He plucks the envelope from the dark wood and holds it up between forefinger and thumb, his blue eyes thickly ringed with gold when he looks questioningly at his Alpha.

Hannibal steps closer, his steps measured and breathing steady.

'I've invited Jack to dinner,' he replies, watching Will's face carefully for signs of doubt or regret. 'The day after tomorrow.'

Will swallows, breaking eye contact and tracing the swirling letters with only his gaze so as not to risk smudging the exquisite penmanship.

'It's beautiful,' he says quietly, setting it back down on the desk. 'Did you teach yourself?'

'My Aunt Murasaki did,' Hannibal replies, following Will as the Omega moves away again. 'She first taught me the traditional Japanese form of *shodō*, which I then transferred to my everyday writing.'

‘She adopted you,’ Will says, trying to recall the full extent of his conversation about family with Hannibal. It seems like such a long time ago; he’d been a different person, then. ‘Along with your Uncle Robertos.’

‘When I was sixteen, yes.’ Hannibal smiles, though it is tinged with sadness. ‘You seem preoccupied with family tonight, Will.’

‘Just thinking about my own,’ Will murmurs, moving on from the desk and sinking into his usual armchair. He grimaces. ‘I’m… *anticipating* attachment,’ he says, echoing himself. ‘I’ve never considered leaving a legacy before now, but that’s what children are. That’s what we’re doing; creating a legacy.’

‘We live on through every one of our actions,’ Hannibal says, taking a seat opposite him. He gestures to the chair, which has become a symbol of so much more than mere therapy for them. ‘You sit in that chair, Will, as you have so many times before. It holds amongst its molecules the vibrations of all our conversations, ever held in its presence.’

Conversations, and everything else we’ve done in this room. You Courted me here; wooed me here… Lied to and tricked me… Broke open my mind and then healed me into something new. Something dark.

Will rubs the flat of his palm over the expensive leather, his body quickening with arousal at the remembered pleasure of countless sex acts.

‘All the exchanges,’ he murmurs, his mouth quirking into another rueful smile. ‘Petty irritations… Deadly revelations… Flat announcements of disaster… Proclamations of love.’

‘The grunts and poetry of life,’ Hannibal says, his eyes warming to burgundy at the dark, ethereal beauty of his mate. Will sits, ensconced in darkness, barely visible in the shadows of a room lit only by a single lamp and the low flames of a dying fire. ‘Everything we’ve ever said and done. Listen… what do you hear?’

Whispers rise and fall with their breathing, fading out of range with every beat of his heart. Will hears purring, sentences flowing from one honey-smooth voice to another, the ragged pleas of a heat-mad Omega and the soothing tones of an Alpha in control. They slide together, seamless, forming a tapestry of manipulation and deceit, love and devotion.

‘A melody,’ he admits, and Hannibal adds a new purr to the harmony.

‘We’re orchestrations of carbon,’ he says. ‘You and me.’

It’s always been you and me, and now we’ve made another life to share. A child to mold in our own image.

‘And Jack,’ Will whispers, reminding his Alpha of their current predicament. Of the hunter closing in on them from behind.

Hannibal’s eyes gleam.

‘And Jack,’ he agrees. ‘All our destinies flying and swimming in blood and emptiness.’

Will looks towards the invite on the desk; he can imagine it humming, glowing like a beacon, calling him home.

Reveal yourself.

'Everybody's settling in for dinner…' His eyes flood with gold and he looks back at Hannibal. 'Jack won't be easy to kill,' he warns. 'He'll be armed. He's strong, well-trained… We can't hesitate.'

Hannibal tilts his head, considering the easy set of his mate's shoulders, the openness of his position and the black rage dancing in his eyes.

Are you truly mine, Will?

'"We",' he echoes. 'Will you be with me?'

Will frowns, confused, but before he can reply, Hannibal explains,

'When the fox hears a rabbit scream, he comes running… But not to help.' He gestures to Will, holding his attention. 'When you hear Jack scream, why will *you* come running?'

Will glances down, accepting the unspoken rebuke.

'I've played scenarios over and over in my head,' he admits. 'Countless ways it could go.'

Some of the time I kill Jack… Other times I kill you… I don't know which I want more.

'When the moment comes,' Hannibal says, his dark eyes locked onto his mate's face; 'will you do what needs to be done?'

Are you with me?

Will feels the dark current swell within him. He thinks of Abigail, killed and buried somewhere, her ear forced down his throat with a feeding tube… He thinks of his weeks spent in the asylum, prodded and poked, treated worse than an animal… Thinks of Beverly Katz and Miriam Lass; thinks of Cassie Boyle and the countless other men and women Hannibal has killed over the years… Families ruined, lives cut short…

Will I do what needs to be done to stop you? he thinks, and he lifts his chin, his eyes glowing.

'Yes.'

***

Dinner is an unhurried affair. Three courses, Will driving so Hannibal can have wine. Afterwards, they walk the dogs one last time and then relax before a fire in the study. Hannibal sits at one end of the long sofa, his tablet open before him. Will lies across the couch, his head propped on pillows and legs in his Alpha's lap. Soft music plays in the background; soothing cellos to ease them towards sleep.

‘Are the dogs’ vaccinations up to date?’ Hannibal asks, running down his checklist in preparation for their departure to Italy.

‘And they’ve all been microchipped,’ Will confirms, turning the pages of his newspaper with a rustle. ‘Buster and Rudy will need sedating for the plane, but the rest are fine.’

He glances at the dogs, counting them off before the fire and finding Winston stretched out right beneath the couch, as close as he can get to them without being invited up.

‘I’ll make the necessary arrangements,’ Hannibal says, satisfied, and ticks it off his list. He reaches for the glass of Chianti beside him and takes a slow sip, savoring the taste of it. Then, without looking, he passes it to Will, who is holding out his hand for him to share.

‘Mm,’ the Omega hums. ‘It’s much better now. It definitely needed more air.’

‘The perils of a good vintage,’ Hannibal jests, taking the glass back for another drink. ‘I’m glad I opened it as soon as we arrived home.’

‘What did you think of the restaurant?’ Will asks, trying to return to the paper but the words nonsensical. His eyes itch with tiredness and another yawn cracks his jaw before he can repress it.

‘Time for bed,’ Hannibal announces, closing the cover on his iPad and setting it down. He nudges Will’s legs. ‘You put the dogs away, I’ll turn down the covers.’

‘A little longer,’ Will protests, though he does abandon his attempts at reading and hand Hannibal the newspaper. ‘I’m enjoying myself too much to let it end.’

Hannibal smiles. He massages the strong muscles of Will’s calves and then slides his hands lower, thumbs digging into the sensitive pressure points of his foot, under the heel and into the arch.

‘Mmmm…’ Will moans softly and closes his eyes. He tilts his head back, relaxing into the foot rub. ‘You could make a new career out of that.’

‘The mind is far more enticing than the body,’ Hannibal replies, working the joints of Will’s toes. ‘Though a new career is a good idea.’

‘Surgeon, psychiatrist…’ *Serial killer.* Will bites his lip to keep from saying the last one out loud, and he distracts his mate from catching the thought by placing his neglected foot into his grasp. ‘What’s next for the great Hannibal Lecter?’

Hannibal chuckles at the overt instruction to switch legs and dutifully massages Will’s left foot. His ankles are a little swollen from pregnancy; no doubt the manipulation of muscles and tendons is soothing.

‘Perhaps history,’ he says, squeezing the ball of Will’s heel to stimulate blood flow. ‘Literature; the great scholars and artists of Renaissance Italy.’

‘*Il professore*,’ Will murmurs, unable to lift his heavy eyelids from their sockets. ‘Has a nice ring to it.’

‘As does *Signore Graham*,’ Hannibal replies. He releases his Omega’s feet and guides his legs to the ground, standing up and reaching for him. ‘Come, or do you need me to carry you?’

‘Fuck off,’ Will grumbles, rubbing his eyes and scowling, blearily, at the Alpha grinning down at him. ‘I’m pregnant, not an invalid.’

‘I promise you, my love; I know your strength all too well,’ Hannibal says, his irises prickling red with affection when Will grudgingly allows him to help him to his feet. ‘It’s why I asked you to give the invitation to Jack, tomorrow.’

‘That doesn’t require strength,’ Will says, gesturing for the dogs to follow him to the kitchen and the back yard beyond. ‘Just a visitor’s pass into Quantico.’

‘Has Jack confirmed a meeting time?’ Hannibal asks, following behind and lingering by the oven as Will oversees the animals’ toileting. ‘I trust you’ll be home for dinner.’

‘I’ll be back well before that,’ Will replies, watching his own reflection in the glass of the back door. When he turns his head, he can see the wendigo, right where Hannibal stands. An emaciated hand reaches for him, claws bared and eager for flesh, its blank white eyes locking him in place… ‘I’ll join you in the office. We can come home together.’

Together…

Hannibal’s deep purr rings throughout the room and Will finds himself responding to it, keening softly as the demon’s claws rake his crest, skittering up and down his spine to stain his flesh black.

I’m yours and you’re mine. We’ll never be separate again.

‘“What you choose, what you think and what you *do* is who you become”,’ Hannibal murmurs, watching his Omega’s eyes flood gold, his body undulating and responding to something only he can see. A wasted creature, endlessly hungry, savage in its thirst for pleasure. It is the monster Will sees when he pulls back the veil; the monster he believes Hannibal to be.

And yet he embraces it. Hannibal can feel it through their bond; his mate grips tight to the skeletal arms and wraps them around him, submerging himself in darkness, encased in shadows.

‘It’s alright,’ he says softly, bringing the other man back from his mind with a touch on the shoulder. ‘I’m right here.’

Will flinches as reality crashes back in on him; he feels raw, exposed, and turns his face to his Alpha’s chest. Hannibal cradles him close, petting his hair to soothe him, giving his nape a quick squeeze and kissing his lips when Will tilts his head to look at him.

‘You need to sleep,’ Hannibal insists, and Will nods his agreement. The hallucinations are worse when he’s tired or stressed; right now, he’s both, and all he wants is the comfort of their nest, their bed, and his Alpha’s warm body beside him.

‘Your mind is a beautiful, broken thing, Will,’ Hannibal says, locking the door once all the dogs are back inside. ‘If you apply yourself to the task, you can become so much more than you already are.’

***

What we think, we become.

It’s dark. He’s walking towards the farmhouse, his boots crunching through snow. The cold doesn’t touch him, though; nothing touches him.

Will steps up onto the porch, staring at the dark glass of the front door. Lamps glow behind the windows, illuminating the mismatched furniture and pack of dogs barring his entry.

They bark at him, growling with hackles raised. They’ve never growled at him before; never been aggressive towards him.

They don’t recognize me, anymore.

‘Ssshh…’

Fear is a lump of ice in Will’s gut. He turns his head, searching for the sound, and a scream wedges in his throat.

Garrett Jacob Hobbs sits in the wicker chair on the porch, shushing the dogs. *His* dogs… Will stares, unable to tear his gaze away from the scuffed eyes, pasty skin and sunken cheeks.

I killed you. I tore you apart and you dragged me right down into hell with you.

The long-dead Alpha gets to his feet and moves to the porch railing. Will moves to stand beside him, his dark shadow swelling, giving him the strength to lift the hunting rifle in his arms. The farmhouse is actually a hunting lodge, sat high amidst a thicket of trees. The branches are sharp as antlers, sharp as knives.

I’ve killed one Alpha. Now to kill another.

Garrett watches him, purring softly at the concentration on Will’s face.

‘See?’ he croons, and Will *does* see. He sees the Ravenstag below; snorting softly, its breath clouding the air as it tries to hide between the trunks. ‘*See*.’

I promised you a reckoning.

He knows what he has to do. Will takes aim, squinting through the scope, and pulls the trigger. The rifle jumps in his hands. The shot rings out, deafening him. Metal tears through the stag’s flesh, piercing its heart.

This is my becoming.

‘Hannibal!’ Will grabs for his Alpha the moment he wakes. It’s dark and he’s disoriented. Panic clouds his senses; at the touch of a hand on his bare arm, he flinches away, fearing Hobbs.

Hannibal rubs sleep from his eyes and snaps on the bedside lamp. His Omega is drenched in cold sweat, his heart racing and breath ragged.

‘Will…’ The other man shies from his touch and he leaves the bed to fetch a blanket from the dresser. ‘*Will*… Can you hear me?’ He wraps the thick fleece around Will’s shoulders, perching on the edge of the bed and holding him close when his mate allows. ‘I’m here… It was just a dream.’

‘I saw Hobbs,’ Will whispers, shivering in the embrace. His jaw aches where he clenches his teeth to keep them from chattering and he whines softly when Hannibal tries to move.

‘Lie with me,’ Hannibal says, guiding him back down. Will curls up against his chest, fingers still twitching in and out of fists, and Hannibal strokes his hair, careful to avoid his nape though he longs to squeeze it and banish his fear with a flood of endorphins. ‘Would you like to talk about it?’

I hunted you. Killed you. Betrayed you.

Will shakes his head.

‘Can we just stay awake for a bit?’ he asks, his shoulders dropping in relief when he feels Hannibal nod. He doesn’t want to discuss his nightmare – if it can even be called that – but he can’t risk going back to sleep just yet, either. ‘You can turn the light off, I just…’

‘Whatever you need,’ Hannibal promises. He makes no move to plunge them into darkness, and although Will had said he could, he’s grateful that he doesn’t. He feels soft lips against his forehead and then, after a while, Hannibal’s breathing evens out as sleep claims him once again.

I don’t want to kill you, he thinks, eyes resolutely open even as the night fades to morning. *Just the monster inside you.*

***

The next day, Will is bleary-eyed as he signs into the visitor’s log at Quantico. He risks the bitter coffee of the vending machine as he waits in the lobby, his herringbone coat folded over his arm and invitation a dead weight in the pocket.

Jack is late enough down to the turnstiles that Will has finished the bitter black liquid and is considering another cup when he finally arrives.

‘Briefing overran,’ is the only explanation he gets, and Will passes him the envelope as soon as they reach his office.

‘What’s this?’ the Alpha asks, eyes flashing red at the scent of Dr Lecter on the paper. Will says nothing; just sits with a sigh in one of the chairs across the desk from his former boss.

Jack sits as well, turning the thick envelope over in his hands before slitting the edge to access the letter.

‘“Dr Hannibal Lecter and Professor Will Graham request the pleasure of my company for dinner”,’ he reads, glancing up from the elaborate font to the pale Omega sat opposite him. He raises an eyebrow, his lips thinning into a grimace.

‘Everybody’s settling in,’ Will replies; a hollow echo of his previous sentiment. ‘Are you ready?’

‘It’s all planned,’ Jack confirms, and he drops the invite in favor of standing. ‘I’m wearing a wire,’ he says, his muscles tightening and skin itching with Rut at the idea of a hunt, a fight. ‘I have sharp-shooters on the roofs of neighboring houses, with lines of sight to all the windows.’

‘He’ll try to kill you in the kitchen,’ Will advises, his gaze distant, unable to look at the other Alpha as he sets a course to endanger his own. ‘For convenience.’ He huffs a bitter laugh. ‘Makes it easier to prepare the tartare.’

Can’t have anything interfering with his precious fucking meal.

Jack sighs through his nose. He dislikes the deception of this sting operation but it’s what has to be done. He just wishes he didn’t have to put so much trust in Will Graham, Lecter’s Omega, to achieve it.

‘Hannibal thinks you’re his man in the room,’ he says, cutting through the bullshit of polite avoidance. ‘I think you’re mine.’

Will looks at his lap, neither conceding nor denying the accusation, and Jack growls.

‘When the moment comes,’ he says, pushing for an answer; ‘Will you do what needs to be done?’

Will I turn on my Alpha to save your life? Will I condemn my mate to the rest of his life in prison? Or worse; the death penalty?

Will looks up, his eyes flooding gold.

Will I take Hannibal far away from the world, where he can’t hurt anyone else? Will I do whatever needs to be done to protect my baby?

‘Yes.’

***

Whilst Will delivers his invitation to Jack, Hannibal goes to visit Bella Crawford. The Omega is pitifully thin, her skin ashen and brown eyes ringed with the dull gold of sickness. Only the

mound of pillows behind her keeps her vertical; chemotherapy has robbed her of her strength as well as her hair.

'Forgiveness,' she manages, staring bleary-eyed at the Alpha before her; 'is such a profound *conscious* and *unconscious* state of affairs…' She grimaces at her own weakness. 'You can't actually *choose* to do it. It simply *happens* to you.'

Hannibal notes the smattering of hairs remaining on Bella's eyebrows; her sparse eyelashes and the chipped nails where her hands rest in her lap. He can smell the sickly sweet stench of death; it permeates every cell of Bella's emaciated body. The cancer in her lungs has her fighting for air, the masses making every breath feel like drowning.

'Has forgiveness happened to you?' he asks, watching her with a detached sense of curiosity.

Bella rolls her eyes at him.

'I *died*,' she says. 'I'm between deaths.'

'The punctuation at the end of a sentence,' Hannibal replies, 'gives meaning to every word… every space that preceded it.'

Bella frowns, pain making her irises flood with color.

'You… *moved* my punctuation mark, Dr Lecter,' she manages. 'You… *moved* my… *meaning*.' She wheezes, chokes, gasps for air. When her lungs fail and panic rises, she grabs for the plastic mask beside her. Oxygen flows through the tube and she inhales, just enough to keep from passing out.

Hannibal watches the struggle without averting his gaze. To do so would be discourteous. A slow death is, by far, one of God's cruelest choices and, when he tossed the coin and saved Bella's life that day, fate condemned her to suffer. But there is beauty in her pain, and he remains impressed by her dignity.

Once Bella has regained her breath enough to speak, she does. She's exhausted, but she wants to say this before she loses the last of her strength.

'I'm not here…' she manages, 'because… I *wanna* be…' Another hitching gasp. 'You saw to that.' She closes her eyes, fighting the pull of morphine-induced sleep. 'I'm here… because I can't abandon Jack… Not again.'

Hannibal inclines his head; he can sympathize with the sentiment. He would never want to abandon Will.

'Love and death are the great hinges on which all human sympathies turn,' he says, thinking of his own sympathies for his Omega. 'What we do for ourselves dies with us. What we do for others lives beyond us.'

I kill for Mischa; in her memory. Her honor. The Chesapeake Ripper will live on when I am dead and buried; my legacy. My child, through Will, will live on.

‘You saved me for Jack,’ Bella whispers, and Hannibal nods, just a fraction. The Omega frowns at him. ‘Will you save him… for me?’ Her irises flash gold again; dull with pain. ‘When I’m gone?’

Hannibal is quiet. It is an important question; it deserves an honest answer. Jack is hunting him; determined to confront him. Hannibal has his own life to consider; and the lives of his family. He will not allow Jack to threaten them.

There is, however, no safer place than the arms of Death.

His eyes spark red and he smiles.

‘Oh, yes.’

***

Freddie Lounds smiles when Will enters her rooms in the secure unit at Quantico. Bored as she is at staying locked up behind these bamboo walls and one-way glass, she has already filled two notebooks ahead of her memoir, and is planning a screenplay.

She doesn’t offer to make them a drink. They may be in this little coup together, but they are far from friends. Will’s distaste is evident in the tightness of his mouth, and he keeps his blazer on even when he sits on the fashionable wooden couch in her living area. Freddie crosses her legs, sitting just down from him in a green blouse and skin-tight jeans. She’s been taking full advantage of the gym onsite, and she feels as fierce as the Chinese dragons sewn into the silk.

She notes the shadows under Will’s eyes and the paunch of his belly. He’s gained weight since mating, and his deterioration gives her a warm glow.

‘I’m going to enjoy my resurrection,’ she says, smirking at him. ‘Nothing sells better than a survival story.’

Will sighs through his nose. Freddie’s scent is cloying, and though he’s sitting apart from her to avoid tracking it out with him, he can’t help but smell it. He doesn’t look at her; just sits with his hands resting loosely on his thighs, wondering how it got to this.

The hidden apartment is styled exactly like Miriam’s; bamboo plants and wooden furniture; minimalistic and calming.

I pretended to kill her so Hannibal would trust me, completely. I’ve been lying to him, after promising him the truth.

‘I wouldn’t count us as survivors just yet, Freddie,’ he warns, but the Alpha merely quirks a red eyebrow at him.

‘I’m counting *me* as a survivor,’ she replies. She smiles. ‘I started as a cancer editor at a supermarket tabloid.’

Will tilts his head in droll acknowledgement of her endless immorality.

‘Cancer is very *lucrative* media,’ he says, and Freddie hums.

‘Ain’t that the truth?’ She brushes a crease from her pants. ‘“New Cures for Cancer”, “Cancer Miracle Cure”…’ She ignores the brush of guilt at her own participation in such cruel articles.

‘We’re all desperate for a little hope,’ Will says dryly. He frowns, his gaze absent even as his mind whirs. ‘Er… I want to ask you to do something for me, Freddie.’ He swallows, his throat tight and sadness weighing him down. ‘Or, rather, *don’t*.’

He turns his head to look at her, his eyes warming from blue to gold, a perfect match for her red irises.

‘Don’t write about Abigail,’ he says, his shadow adding a faint growl to his voice. ‘You can write about me; you can write about Hannibal… But leave Abigail alone?’

His grief is infectious, and Freddie is surprised to find her eyes filling with tears. The Omega is so lost, so desperate… So utterly swallowed by his own darkness and the power of his mate.

‘You really don’t know if you’re going to survive him, do you?’

Will trembles, but he keeps the low whine from escaping his throat. He swallows it down, instead, and turns away from her.

‘Just let her rest in peace.’

One of us should.

***

They meet at the office for lunch. Will brings coffee and sandwiches from a little deli on his way across his city, and they discuss the final plans for shipping the dogs across to Europe as they eat.

‘The flight has a layover at Toronto,’ Hannibal says, crumpling up his sandwich wrapper and securing it in his empty coffee cup. ‘You can check the dogs when they’re in the holding pens at the airport.’

‘Did you choose a Canada layover in case the FBI is hunting us?’ Will teases, chugging the rest of his Americano and getting up to follow his Alpha.

Hannibal simply smiles back at him over his shoulder, and then ascends the ladder to the mezzanine library to continue dismantling his patient files. He tears pages from books too heavy to safely toss over the edge, and throws others he deems an acceptable risk to his Omega below.

Paper floats down, drifting on the warm air rising from the crackling fire. Copperplate writing, wonky clocks…

Will frowns as he catches a leather-bound book in his arms. When he flicks through the pages, he reads his own name a dozen times, as well as Hannibal's personal comments on him.

Will became angry when discussing family. He suffers severe anxiety over the absence of his own mother. His abandonment issues contribute to his continued forgiveness of Jack Crawford, despite poor treatment, and suggests a desire to be accepted and loved. He is likely to form intense emotional attachments to those whom he trusts.

'These are your notes on me,' he says, looking up at the other man above him.

Hannibal glances down over the railing, feigning surprise, which is utterly ruined, of course, by his smirk and crimson eyes.

'So they are,' he purrs, and Will grins, touched by the offer of intimacy in allowing him to read such private words. He doesn't want to see much, however, and he wanders towards the fireplace with the volume as Hannibal continues to discard unwanted books over the edge.

Will crouches to pick another two notebooks up, carrying them, and his, to the fire.

Will displays incredible versatility and strength of character. His ability to think like a killer, any killer, is truly remarkable. I have never met another man with his skill. He is unique.

The nuchal manipulations, combined with light therapy and estrogen injections, are having an unexpected effect. Will's Prodromal Phasing is causing swelling in the right hemisphere of his brain, indicated by a series of clock drawing tests and confirmed today by Dr Sutcliffe's scan. Will is experiencing spatial neglect, headaches, disorientation, hallucinations and states of altered consciousness.

Curious at the lack of anger he feels at seeing the wonky clock with spilling numbers – evidence of his mate's cruel games with him – Will places the other patient notes on the desk and tosses his book into the fire to burn.

The nuchal manipulations and hormone poisoning won't happen again. Hannibal has changed; they've both changed.

They're equals, now.

He turns as Hannibal brings more books down to be destroyed.

'Won't your patients need these after you're gone?' he asks, coming closer as Hannibal starts to tug pages from the seams of the books. Loose paper burns more easily than leather and cardboard; if the outer cases are left, no matter, but the words must be ruined.

'The FBI will pore over my notes if I leave them intact,' the Alpha replies, casually reading and remembering an old conversation from years ago; a Beta, determined to become an Omega. There's a flicker of curiosity; a mild wondering of whatever became of Jame Gumb, and Hannibal stores it away in an alcove of his memory palace, for later attention. 'I will

spare my patients the scrutiny.' He glances up at Will and smiles sadly. 'I'm dismantling who I was and moving it, brick by brick.'

And it won't save you, Will thinks. He picks up another book from the desk and joins his mate by the fire, feeding pages to the flames.

'When we have gone from this life,' Hannibal says, 'Jack Crawford and the FBI behind us, I will always have this place.' He looks around his office and smiles, giving a satisfied sigh. It is perfectly rendered in his mind; every fold of curtain, every grain of wood.

'In your memory palace?' Will asks, wondering if this office and the dining room at their townhouse are the only places in his Alpha's internal world.

Hannibal's eyes glow burgundy.

'My palace is vast,' he replies. 'Even by medieval standards.' He turns back to Will with a grin. 'The foyer is the Normal Chapel in Palermo; severe and beautiful and timeless.'

We'll see it together, soon.

'With a single reminder of mortality,' he adds, collecting another book to burn. 'A skull; graven in the floor.'

As they stare down into the flames, and Hannibal shares with Will the image of the skeleton, its eyeless face turned upwards to the heavens and hands clasped in prayer.

Will hums, and then shakes his head at his Alpha's ostentatious mind.

'All I need is… a stream.' He smiles ruefully, aware of his own poor substitute for his mate's aristocratic expectations, and turns to get more books to avoid seeing the look of disappointment or judgment on the other man's face.

You still don't realize, Hannibal thinks; *Your wealth lies in that extraordinary mind of yours, and it is endless.*

'In those moments where you can't overcome your surroundings,' he says, accepting a volume from Will when the Omega returns. 'You can make it all go away.'

Just as you did in the asylum.

'Put my head back,' Will agrees. 'Close my eyes… Wade into the quiet of the stream.' He smiles sadly. He'll be doing a lot of fishing in his mind, once Hannibal has been incarcerated. Being separated from him will be torture, but he deserves it after what he's done to trap him.

'If I'm ever apprehended,' Hannibal says, as though catching Will's carefully shielded thought; 'my memory palace will serve as more than a mnemonic system. I will live there.'

We will live there, together. You and I.

He returns to his desk, tugging more pages from leather-bound notebooks. Will turns to face him, his heart squeezing out a hopeful beat.

‘Could you be happy there?’ he asks, desperate for his Alpha to say yes, to ease the pain of betraying him. If Hannibal can be free in his mind, it won’t matter that his body is caged.

Hannibal glances down, his expression sad and mouth tight.

‘All the palace chambers are not lovely, light and bright,’ he admits. ‘In the vaults of our hearts and brains, danger waits. There are holes in the floor of the mind.’

If I fall through, I will be trapped in those woods once again, with nothing but the snow and the ache of hunger in my belly, the clang of bones in a copper pot and the thud of an axe ending a single, high scream.

Will thinks of the wendigo… He knows, too well, the dangers inside his own mind. He would never want to be trapped there.

But Hannibal is stronger than I am. He could survive… He could be fine.

He looks back down at the books, watching as Hannibal sorts the volumes into an order of keep and destroy.

As painful as it will be to trap his Alpha within his own memory palace, it’s the safest course of action. The only way he can be sure Hannibal won’t hurt him, or the baby.

I’m sorry. I have to.

As Will leans in front of him to collect more books for burning, Hannibal steps back and the air shifts. A single scent rises, thin as a gossamer strand, rising from the collar of Will’s shirt. He’s been wearing his blazer for most of the day and the smell is trapped, stored in the fibers of the cotton.

Fire and acid. The burning brimstone of a volcano. Sharp, citrus notes…

A vision comes to mind. Red hair, red curls… Piercing blue eyes and a deceptively pretty face for such a snake.

Freddie Lounds.

Her scent is on Will, and it is very much alive.

Will lied to him. Will lied… He lied about killing Freddie, he lied about setting her corpse aflame… He lied about Jack Crawford suspecting him…

Will tricked me. He made me believe him… Made me trust him…

The pain is… uncomfortable. A tightness in his gut he did not expect. All this time, all these weeks… Will hasn’t forgiven him at all. He’s simply been playing him, manipulating him…

Not my own good. For revenge.

Hannibal watches his Omega's back; the subtle shift of Will's shoulders as the other man drops page after page into the fire. Helping him hide evidence for a life he has no intention of helping him leave.

Was Will ever going to tell him? Or was he simply going to turn on him, have his arrested and watch him rot for the rest of his life behind the bars of a prison cell?

I had no intention of leaving you in the asylum, he thinks, seeking refuge in anger but finding it fleeting. *I thought you were different than the others. I thought you were my equal… Was I really so wrong?*

As Will feeds another piece of paper to the flames, his mind turns over the possibilities of what could happen. Jack Crawford won't kill Hannibal; as much as he might want to, he's too good an Agent to compromise his integrity like that. No, Jack will arrest Hannibal, and Hannibal will be locked away, free to roam the vastness of his memory palace. The world will be safe at last from the Chesapeake Ripper.

It'll all be over soon.

***

Hannibal is unusually quiet on their way home. Will glances at him, worried that the Alpha may be changing his mind about leaving, or that his plan to have Hannibal expose himself may not work, if Hannibal insists on fleeing before confronting Jack.

'Did you get the truffles that you wanted for the final meal?' he asks, hoarser than he'd like, and is relieved when Hannibal graces him with a nod.

'Steak tartare is one of my favorite dishes,' the Alpha replies, indicating and turning off down their street to the townhouse. 'I'll serve it with egg, truffles and a light salad with tomato relish.'

'Anything to use up the two-dozen eggs we got sent home with,' Will agrees, trying for a smile but finding it uncomfortable. As soon as the car stops, he unbuckles his seatbelt. 'Mind if I walk the dogs before dinner?'

'Not at all,' Hannibal says graciously, and Will hurries away with the excuse of their pets having been left longer than usual.

He's not right, the Omega thinks, clipping on the leashes and escaping out of the side gate as Hannibal takes his time removing scarf and coat in the hallway. *He's either changed his mind, or he suspects something… Either way, I can't stop… I just have to hope it's not too late.*

Watching him leave, Hannibal feels an odd sense of ambivalence. As much as he wants to punish Will, to hurt him in immediate response to the pain he's suffering, he also wants to forgive him; to give him a second chance and move on. Forget this place and all they've been through here.

Would you, if I asked you? Would you take the chance to make this relationship real? Make it whole?

He considers how he'll pose the question as he cooks dinner. It is an extravagant meal; a true test of his skill. It is also such typical Alpha peacocking that, when Will returns two hours later, fresh-faced and hungry, he can't help but smile and press a tender kiss to the other man's lips.

'This looks amazing,' he says softly, his gold-ringed eyes roving the dining table as his mate takes a seat at the head. 'You did all this in two hours?'

'I began preparations yesterday,' Hannibal explains, unfolding a napkin and laying it over his lap. 'Though most of it was done this evening, yes.'

'Is it the cooking you enjoy, or the elegance of the meal?' Will asks, inspecting his entrée of escargot in garlic butter sauce, decorated with yellow cauliflower and edible flowers. 'The dishes are beautiful.'

'I enjoy beauty, in many forms,' Hannibal replies, taking a sip of crisp Chardonnay to compliment the tastes in his mouth. 'And there is a perverse satisfaction in extravagance for the sake of it.'

'Hard to do when you're poor,' Will says, sipping the smaller glass of wine he's allowed. The snails are rich, and he doesn't eat many, but Hannibal doesn't comment on the wasted food. It would be hypocritical; after all, half the dishes on the table have been cooked just for show.

'Presenting a feast to one's mate has long been considered an act of romance and extended Courtship,' Hannibal reasons, returning with the second course; fresh lobster, cucumber and Charentais melon with apple, radish and nasturtium. 'Particularly in Europe.'

Will practically inhales the second dish, even wiping his finger through the sauce to get the last taste of lobster. It is a rare delicacy these days, given the child inside him, and he wants to savor the meat while he can.

'I'm not as uncomfortable with your lifestyle as I used to be,' he admits, dipping his head and smiling up at his Alpha. 'It's just the er, peril of different breeding.'

The main course is roasted lamb, served with a mint and pomegranate jus. Once it's eaten, and the plates are littered with bones and the smears of a good meal, Hannibal speaks again.

'Breeding has little to do with money,' he says, picking up their earlier conversation. 'I didn't choose you *despite* your social standing. I chose you because I saw in you my equal.' He allows a little of his sorrow to bleed into his face, and his next words are spoken softly. 'Do you know what an imago is, Will?'

'It's a flying insect,' Will replies, unnerved by the sudden change in tone.

'It's the last stage of a transformation,' Hannibal explains, and Will nods slowly, understanding the connection.

‘When you become who you will be?’ He wets his lips, considering the metaphor, and then Hannibal speaks again.

‘It’s also a term from the dead religion of psychoanalysis.’ Hannibal sighs, and lifts dark eyes to his Omega’s face. ‘An imago is an image of a loved one, buried in the unconscious, carried with us all our lives.’

‘An ideal,’ Will murmurs, wondering what his ideal looks like. He certainly has an ideal version of Hannibal, though, lately, he’s not sure if that ideal hasn’t changed to the reality sitting before him.

‘The concept of an ideal,’ Hannibal replies; a subtle correction. ‘I have a concept of you; just as you have a concept of me.’

I believed you to be my partner; my honest mate. That is my concept, not the truth.

‘Neither of us ideal,’ Will says, bitterly, and his eyes flash gold at the surge of emotion. Hannibal watches him closely, able to observe him as Will keeps his traitorous eyes on the plate before him.

You resent me, still, for all that I have done for you, the Alpha thinks. He wants to feel resentment at Will’s disregard for the effort spent on him, but all he feels is grief to think he never truly won the love and respect of such a fierce creature. The love he feels for Will, he has only felt once before, and Mischa is long dead. Will is his life, now, and he won’t surrender it without a fight.

‘Both of us are too curious about too many things for any ideals,’ he admits. It is a confession, of sorts, and a warning. He has been, and remains, too curious about Will’s darkness and twisted empathy to leave him be; he will always manipulate and push him to his true potential. For that, he is sorry, but he knows his own nature, and he will not stop. Will, it seems, does not accept that part of him. He would rather see his Alpha behind bars than explore his own talents with him.

He pauses, his chest tightening with fragile hope as he asks,

‘Is it ideal that Jack die?’

Are you so set on betraying me that you won’t reconsider and save yourself?

Will glances at him, wondering if Hannibal feels remorse at the idea of killing his good friend. *It won’t happen,* he thinks, but Hannibal doesn’t know he will be apprehended beforehand.

‘It’s necessary,’ he insists, and he pulls on some of his dark shadow to twist his lips into a cruel smile as he continues the charade. ‘What happens to Jack has been… preordained.’

Planned and prepared, meticulous and dangerous; we can’t stop now.

He swallows back a purr with a drink of wine; a peppery Merlot that adds a sharp zing to the sweetness of the lamb.

Hannibal watches him, a thousand emotions hiding just under the surface of his expression, fluttering like the breeze behind a veil.

I have to try… Once more; I have to try.

'We could disappear now,' he murmurs, only his iron will keeping his voice from breaking with the desperation behind the plea. 'Tonight.'

Will looks at him, openly puzzled, but Hannibal continues before he can interrupt.

'We'll take the dogs… Leave a note for Alana and never see her or Jack again.' His lips twitch and he almost manages a smile, though it feels more like the crush of tears in his throat. 'Almost polite.'

The silence hangs between them. It is as heavy with potential as the first time they met, and just as fragile. Hannibal stares at his Omega, at the man to whom he has so thoroughly lost his heart, and he finds himself praying to his unhearing God that Will says yes.

Please… Please, Will… I don't want to lose you. I want us to be together, now and for always. But if you go down this path, I can't protect you. I can't protect our baby.

Will's heart swells. God, he *wants* to. He wants to go with him so *badly* it hurts…

'Then, this would be our last supper,' he says, his voice hoarse. He tries to smile but his eyes are wet with tears and his lips quiver, and Hannibal doesn't return it. Just glances down at the plates before them and sighs.

'Of this life,' he replies, reminding them of Europe waiting for them. He adds a shrug and smooths out the used napkin beside him. 'I served lamb,' he reasons, and Will fiddles with the stem of his wineglass.

'Sacrificial?' the Omega asks, but his Alpha shakes his head.

'I don't need a sacrifice,' Hannibal whispers, keeping his face downcast to hide the pain in his eyes. 'Do you?'

Do you need to sacrifice me more than you need to save the baby?

'I need him to know,' Will says, mouth twisted in unhappiness. He lifts his eyes, his gaze distant. 'If I confess to Jack Crawford right now…' He can't finish, but Hannibal can.

'I would forgive you.'

I would forgive you anything, Will.

Will looks at him, slowly, still lost to the war raging inside him, and Hannibal manages a smile.

'If Jack were to tell you all is forgiven… would you accept his forgiveness?'

Would you accept mine? Would you set aside your wrath to save our child?

Will's lips thin, and he gives the barest shake of his head, almost breathless at what he's committing to. At what he no longer feels is right, but what he *has* to do.

'Jack isn't offering forgiveness,' he whispers.

And neither am I.

Aloud, he adds,

'He wants… justice.' He tries to swallow but can't. 'He wants to see you… See who you are.' His voice grows stronger, even if it's fueled by self-hatred. 'See what *I've* become.'

A manipulator. A killer. An Omega willing to sacrifice his own Alpha to save innocent lives.

'He wants the truth,' he growls, and his eyes glow gold as he smiles at Hannibal, sealing his fate.

So be it.

Hannibal considers Will carefully; his clever, cruel Omega, and he forces his lips to smile, even as his heart breaks.

I gave you a chance, mylimasis. You didn't take it.

'To the truth then,' he says, and the finality of his decision weighs him down until the warmth seeps from his heart. He sighs, and picks up his wine, toasting a final lament to this life, *their* life together. 'And *all* its consequences.'

***

They make love slowly that night.

Hannibal kisses Will tenderly, running his fingers through his curls and spreading his palms flat over his belly, paying final homage to the child slumbering inside. Then, with barely a word, he rolls him over and leaves the bed to warm a pot of rose-scented oil, which he drizzles over his Omega's back upon his return.

He straddles Will's buttocks, leaning down to massage the oil into his mate's tight, tender muscles using the excuse to memorize the ridges of his Omega's crest.

A nuchalectomy has long been argued the most traumatic things an Omega can experience. Cutting out the crest given to them by a claiming Alpha is the equivalent to tearing apart one's psyche. The Omega rarely survives, and, if the Omega is pregnant, the fetus is aborted.

They either leave this life together, or they have no life.

'Hannibal?'

Will shifts as something drips onto his back; he doesn't want Hannibal to spill the oil onto the sheets and make a mess. Before he can ask anything further, he hears his Alpha shift and then a slick finger slides between his ass cheeks, making him groan in surprise.

Hannibal wipes tears from his cheeks, catching them before another can fall. He focuses his efforts on distracting Will, and soon has the Omega's hips canted upwards for mounting, weight braced on elbows and forehead pressed to the mattress.

I would have given you everything, he thinks, gritting his teeth as he slides inside the other man. *We could have had the world.*

Will relaxes under Hannibal's weight, sinking into the waves of pleasure as his Alpha moves, slow and steady. The ache fades to something sweet and he starts to push backwards, matching him thrust for thrust. The sheets rustle, the fire crackles and the scented air fills with grunts of effort and the slap of skin.

'There,' Will moans, arching his spine and rolling down onto the hardness inside him, fanning the flames until an inferno threatens to take him over the edge. 'There, Hannibal, *there*.'

Hannibal yanks Will up to a kneeling position, forcing the Omega to bear down around his swelling knot. He wraps a hand around the smaller man's throat, jerking his head back, and locks the other arm possessively around his waist. They chase their own climaxes, as lonely as planets, and Hannibal sees them in the billowing white bed of their memory palace.

We could have been happy.

He dims the room, extinguishing the candles and silencing the sounds of a child splashing outside in a copper tub. Will folds forwards, sated and boneless after peaking, and Hannibal lies behind him, locked together by biology.

He will need the right knife. Not a scalpel; a nuchalectomy requires a very specific blade, similar to that of a linoleum knife. The curved blade, razor sharp, will slice through the skin and sever the nerves at the spinal cord.

'That felt different,' Will murmurs, lifting Hannibal's hand from his stomach and kissing the knuckles. 'Are you going to miss this place?'

'I'll miss a great many things,' Hannibal replies, equally hushed. He allows Will to kiss and play with his fingers, coolly observing the constant affections of the nervous Omega. Will may not realize it, but his body instinctively recognizes a distance between them, and he is subconsciously seeking closeness. 'My life has changed so much since meeting you. I doubt it can ever be the same.'

'I'll miss the trout from my local river,' Will says, smiling against the ball of Hannibal's thumb at his own feeble attempt at humor. 'It'd be nice to try that *Nietzschean* dish again, now that my morning sickness has subsided.'

‘Every experience shapes us,’ Hannibal replies, and he kisses the crook of Will’s neck, inhaling his scent and storing it, safely, in the vaults of his mind. ‘How every different our lives could have been.’

***

He’s alone.

Will lies, surrounded by darkness, unable to protect himself from it. It swarms behind his eyelids, flowing like murky water over his feet, his ankles, his legs, up across his body and crushing the baby.

It comes inside him, insidious, staining him like ink. It runs up his nose, into his ears, running down his throat until it drowns him…

‘I feel poisoned,’ Alana whispers, and Will jerks back to reality with a sharp blink. The nightmare from last night still haunts him; his skin pebbles and his glazed, bloodshot eyes speak of the insomnia that had plagued him until dawn.

He’s back at Quantico for one last visit, though he has no intention of seeing Jack or Freddie Lounds again.

They’re sitting in the BSU’s conference room, the dull gray light of outside leeching the color from the beige walls, leaving them drab. The glass table sits between them; Alana at one side, Will just off to the other, but it may as well be a canyon.

They will never truly be friends again.

‘We’ve all been poisoned,’ Will replies, his voice hoarse. Of everyone, he’s the most damaged by Hannibal. After all, no one *else* is mated to the Chesapeake Ripper.

‘You saw what no one else could,’ Alana says softly, and Will huffs, fighting tears and failing. He turns in the chair, wetness glistening on his cheeks, and gives a shaky sigh.

‘And all it took was the er… *traumatic*,’ he says, sharing a grim look with the Beta.

Alana raises her gaze to the ceiling.

‘We’re still in the thick of it,’ she says, her voice tight with tears, and Will can’t help but try to console her with an empty comfort.

‘We’re getting through the worst of it.’

Alana leans forwards, stopping just shy of reaching for Will’s hand and leaning her elbow on the table, instead. She fixes her blue eyes on him, her lips red with grief, her cheeks still blotchy from an earlier cry.

‘You’ve set some sort of trap and you’re goading Hannibal into it,’ she says, panicked at the idea of something so dangerous. When Will doesn’t reply, either to confirm or deny, she knows it’s true, and adds, for good measure, ‘How can you be sure he’s not goading you?’

After all, it wouldn't be the first time.

Will's resolve crumbles, just a little, and he gives a wobbly smile, which is somehow more terrifying than anything Alana has ever seen before.

'I can't,' the Omega whispers, shrugging his shoulders in defeat. 'But I have to try.'

I can't just let him go… Can I?

***

Ten minutes after Will drives his battered old Volvo away from Quantico, Kade Prurnell leaves her office, where she's just received another very alarming e-mail from Dr Alana Bloom, asking for her help in protecting her colleagues from the danger of their mission.

The red of Kade's furious eyes clash with the orange of her suit, and lower-grade Agents scatter before her, leaving her path clear. As she passes Security, she snaps her fingers and two Alphas jump to attention, following closely behind her as she strides into the Behavioral Science Unit.

'Tell me what you're doing with Will Graham and Dr Lecter,' she says, by way of greeting when she walks into Jack's office.

Jack Crawford looks up, red-handed in the midst of checking his wire and gun. He has a moment of silence, shocked at the sight of her, but quickly recovers.

'Agent Prurnell,' he says, rising to his feet. 'How can I –'

'*Now*, Jack,' the Federal Examiner demands, and Jack flushes. He clears his throat, though, and quickly and clearly articulates the plan, rising to face his accuser.

'– as soon as Hannibal attacks, I'll arrest him, call for backup and he'll be taken down before anyone gets hurts,' he finishes, wishing he feels as confident as he sounds.

Kade's eyes widen with disbelief.

'This is entrapment, Jack,' she says, but Jack shakes his head.

'You can't entrap someone into committing pre-meditated murder!' he argues, his eyes flashing red.

'Yes,' Kade argues, 'you *can*. You're doing it.' Her thin lips thin even further, and a muscle twitches in her jaw. 'You conspired to violate Dr Lecter's property and personal rights. And,' she adds, her voice thickening with a derisive growl, 'for the record; the only one involved in this investigation we can confirm *actually* having killed someone is Will Graham.'

'It was self-defense,' Jack replies, his hands clasped tightly before him, shoulders squared and teeth clenched.

Kade huffs and tries again, as if talking to an imbecile.

‘Hannibal Lecter is being induced to commit murder by an *Omegan* uncover FBI informant,’ she explains. ‘This is *outrageous* government conduct. You would never get a conviction!’

Jack looks away, barely able to swallow back a snarl.

‘You’re not thinking clearly, Jack,’ Kade warns, and Jack turns back to her, his eyes ablaze.

‘We are close as we are ever going to get to *catching* this man!’ His voice breaks into a shout as desperation floods his body with Rut hormones. The red in Kade’s eyes brightens in response, but she controls her instincts with the same iron will with which she controls her Omega’s heats, and she attempts to speak softly; compassionately.

‘I understand that your mate is very ill,’ she says, hoping her tone is sympathetic. ‘You’re distracted.’ Before Jack can reply with another argument, she continues, ‘After an inquiry, I’m putting you on forced compassionate leave.’

She holds his gaze as Jack stares at her, and, eventually, the other Alpha sighs in resignation. The two Security Officers behind Kade are too strong for him to fight back.

It’s over.

Jack pulls his badge and gun from the holster on his belt, laying them on his desk before Ms. Prurnell.

He won’t have snipers… It doesn’t matter. He has a gun at home, and it won’t stop him from doing what he has to do.

It won’t stop Will from helping him.

I’ve given my whole life to the FBI, he thinks, staring sadly at the gold badge on the front of his ID holder. *The chance to have children… The chance for a normal life… And for what? To be cut off when I need help the most.*

The Security Officers adjust their weight, indicating that he needs to come with them. Jack doesn’t collect anything; he leads the way out of the building, and is escorted through the turnstiles to the reception lobby, and out into the dwindling light of the afternoon.

He’ll do it his way, then.

***

The moment Jack leaves the room, Kade rounds the desk and takes the other Alpha’s seat. She opens his drawers, searching for the files, and pulls a stack of them out with an exasperated sigh.

‘What have you been up to, Jack?’ she mutters, flicking open the pages and staring down at the photos of Randall Tier’s mutilated corpse.

‘You,’ she calls, waving a BSU Agent inside. ‘Get me a large coffee. Black, no sugar.’

She's going to start from the beginning and get to the bottom of this farce.

***

Bella is asleep when Jack gets home. He sits with her in their bedroom, listening to her labored, ragged breathing.

He knows what he has to do. He knows the risk is much greater now that the snipers won't be there as backup.

He wants to take as much time with his beloved Bella as possible, before he leaves. After all, he may never come back.

***

'This is just *staggering*,' Kade says, flicking through the files on Jack's desk and shaking her head as every revelation makes the situation that much *worse*.

Alana Bloom stands before her, chewing on her lower lip in worry at how far in the wrong direction the Federal Examiner has taken her request for help. She hadn't meant to kick the hornet's nest so thoroughly; she'd just expected Jack and Will to be called up on their reckless behavior, and a proper task force to be assembled to support them.

'What are you going to do about Hannibal Lecter?' she asks, and Kade lifts her head to look up at her with impatience, her glasses flashing in the low light.

'What Jack *should* have done,' she snaps. 'We've frozen his passport and we're getting a search warrant.'

No… No, no…

Alana's lips tingle and she feels the blood drain from her face as such conservative, useless, actions.

'Hannibal already opened his doors to the FBI,' she says. 'There won't be physical evidence. The only way to catch him is in the *act*. You need to give Jack more men!'

Kade removes her glasses with a frown.

'Are you saying we should have just let Jack hang himself?' she asks, glaring at the foolish Beta. '*And* everyone *else* in his department?'

'No,' Alana says, her voice hoarse with panic. 'But Will and Jack are still your best chance to catch Hannibal.'

Kade considers her for a moment, and then picks up the file on Randall Tier.

'This Alpha that Will Graham *killed* in "self-defense"…' She removes photo after photo, forcing Alana to look at the jaw sewn into a saber-cat skull, the torn flesh and broken bones of the body. 'He was *mutilated*. At a certain point, "self-defense" stops. Will Graham didn't

stop.' She sighs, wondering why nobody else understands the gravity of the situation. 'Jack Crawford sanctioned this behavior, from an *Omega*, and then he hid it from us.'

Alana feels tears choke her throat.

'I have to believe that Will was trying to maintain his cover identity,' she manages, but Kade shakes her head with a sneer.

'Reality doesn't just go away because you stop believing in it,' she replies. 'It's stubborn like that. The reality of this situation is that Jack Crawford misused the power of his office.'

No… No…

Alana leans forwards, her palms leaving sweaty marks on the edge of the desk.

'Ms. Prurnell,' she begs; 'they are *desperate*.'

'They,' Kade drawls, 'are breaking the law.' She sniffs. 'I'm bringing them both up on charges.'

Alana bows her head, the carpet beneath her boots soaking up her tears of frustration.

'They're not going to stop,' she admits; a warning and a plea. Kade shrugs.

'That's why they're being brought into custody,' she says, but Alana tries once more.

'Jack knows what you'll find. He knows what you have to do…' She catches Kade's red-ringed eyes and holds them, as fierce as any Alpha. 'That won't stop *him* from doing what *he* has to do.'

***

It's time.

Jack bends over and kisses Bella's cool forehead. She's sleeping deeply, peaceful for the first time in days, and he's glad he added more morphine to her drip. He doesn't want her waking and worrying about him whilst he's gone.

I love you, he thinks, inhaling her weak, ill-tainted scent and savoring it for all the memories it brings. The day they met; their engagement, their wedding and every night since then… Two-dozen years together, each more perfect than the last.

If he never sees her again, he will remember the love he feels for her in this moment.

And then he leaves, shutting the door behind him and fetching his pistol from the closet. It's a long drive back to Baltimore, and he doesn't have much time.

***

Will is feeding the dogs in the farmhouse when his phone rings. They agreed, yesterday, that having the animals around when Jack attacked would be too dangerous; they might escape the pantry and get underfoot, or worse, get hurt.

After seeing Alana, Will had returned to the townhouse and collected the dogs, taking them for a long walk before driving back to Wolf Trap.

Oddly, the lonely little farmhouse doesn't feel much like home, anymore. He appreciates the space and the simple furnishings, but he misses the mingled scents of him and Hannibal in the townhouse.

The shrill 'bring' of the landline startles him, and he has to hunt down the cordless phone for a few minutes, so used to getting calls on his cell that he's lost it under a pile of towels.

'Hello?' he asks, wandering through from the kitchen to the dimly lit lounge.

'It's Alana.' The Beta's voice is hushed, thick with grief. 'Is Jack with you?'

'No,' Will replies, frowning. 'Why?'

In her car in the FBI parking lot, Alana rests her tear-stained face on the cool glass of her window and pinches the bridge of her nose.

'They've issued a warrant for your arrest, Will.' She takes a shaky breath and licks salty lips. 'For "acting as an accessory to entrapment" …'

Will closes his eyes, his chest squeezed tight in a vice.

It's all coming apart.

The dogs bark, hearing car tires long before he does, and he glances up just in time to see car headlights as Alana continues,

'… And for the murder of the Alpha, Randall Tier.'

It's a black SUV, standard issue… There'll be three Agents inside, all of them Alphas. They'll have a crest brace and handcuffs… Everything they need to subdue an unstable Omega.

I'm not going through that again.

'They're going to arrest Jack, as well,' Alana adds. When there's silence, her heart skips a beat. 'Will?'

I have to go to Hannibal.

'Goodbye, Alana,' Will says, and hangs up on his friend, just as a second SUV joins the first. He ducks down, out of sight of the window, and tugs his gun from the holster hidden underneath the desk.

He'll run to the main road, and call a cab from there. The dogs will be safe here, and will distract the FBI Agents enough to give him a decent head start.

Jack's going after Hannibal… I have to get there first.

He grabs his coat and dashes out the back, leaping a mound of snow so as not to leave footprints before disappearing into the trees at the edge of the yard.

I won't make it in time, he thinks, checking his watch. *Jack's closer… He'll get there before me…*

He's already dialed Hannibal's number, his fingers numb on the pad of his cell phone, and it's only when he hears his Alpha's voice answer that he realizes what he's done.

The choice that he's made.

In the kitchen of the townhouse, Hannibal slices orange bell papers into perfect symmetrical strips. There is no music playing, this time. The occasion is too somber even for Brahms, and the high tones of his landline is immediately answered.

'Hello?'

In the woods above the farmhouse, Will's throat closes around a low whine. He feels his eyes pulse gold and he presses a hand to his belly, even as the bottom drops out of his stomach and he *feels* his baby twitch.

'They know,' he whispers.

They know. Jack knows. He's coming for you.

A thousand unspoken things, carried in the weight of two words. The same two words spoken to Hobbs, right before Will attacked.

This is your warning. Your chance to escape.

Hannibal's head lifts, his eyes flash red, and his heart begins to beat very fast.

Will warned him. Will chose him, at the last moment.

Too little, too late, but he chose him.

He hangs up, a smile lingering on his lips.

He needs to prepare for Jack's arrival.

***

Rutting Alphas stink of musk. Bitter and cloying, it is a heavy odor that settles like dust on every surface it touches.

Jack Crawford reeks of Rut, no matter how much he may try to hide it. His burgundy eyes are bloodshot and there is a light sheen of sweat on his forehead. Body temperature typically rises by five to ten degrees, fueled by a rapidly pumping heart. Blood vessels widen, allowing for a more economic consumption of oxygen to power muscles and give both speed and strength to the Alpha.

Hannibal knows this, and he is counting on it. After all, it is how he intends to kill Agent Crawford.

He glances up when Jack enters the kitchen, still sliding his knife through the marbled flesh beneath him, carving perfect steak medallions for dinner. Jack's heavy footfalls are calculated. Precise. He holds himself taut as a bowstring, ready to fight.

His expression is weary. He is a man prepared for the worst.

Hannibal can feel each subtle shift within his own body; the flare of his nostrils and the way his lips part a fraction, gathering Jack's scent onto the glands in the roof of his mouth… Jack tastes strong, an Alpha in his prime… But he is angry, oh, so *very* angry, and emotion saps intelligence.

Hannibal's mouth curves into a tiny, satisfied smile. He is, after all, greeting a friend. Greeting, and bidding farewell, for they cannot both leave this room alive.

'Hello, Jack,' he purrs. 'You're early.'

Jack comes ever closer, a circling shark.

'I couldn't wait to get here,' he replies, trying for a smile but barely managing a grimace.

Hannibal spins the knife block around, offering him a weapon.

'Would you care to sous-chef?' he offers, as if nothing is wrong. As if tension doesn't crackle like lightning.

Jack does smile, this time. He smiles and there is a brittle, ugly quality to it. He sees him; he sees behind the person suit and the darkness disgusts him.

All this time…

'I wanna thank you,' he says softly. 'For your friendship, Hannibal…'

For fucking with me and deceiving me… For killing my friends and colleagues… For taking Will and twisting him into something unrecognizable.

Hannibal nods. He understands. He knows that Jack has lifted the veil and is seeing him, honestly, for all that he is.

It terrifies the other man.

‘The most beautiful quality of a true friendship is to understand,’ he says, returning to the steak. ‘And be understood with absolute clarity.’

He brings the salad bowl closer and lays the knife across it, ready to grab in an instant. His own face is reflected in the sharp steel; his mouth is a grim line, his eyes burgundy, fast warming to red.

‘And this is…’ Jack sighs, feeling sick. ‘The *clearest* moment of our friendship.’

You’re the Chesapeake Ripper. You’re a murderer. And I’m going to stop you.

He reaches for his gun, slipping his hand beneath his suit jacket. Hannibal is fast, far faster than anyone knows, and he throws the knife with deadly accuracy. Over and over it turns, razor edge whistling through the still air, an opening note to the patter of rain just started outside. And then it lands, right on target, spearing through the flesh and muscle and bone of Jack’s hand, knocking the gun from suddenly limp fingers.

Hannibal, never one to waste an opportunity, vaults the counter with all his Alphan grace, launching himself at Jack even as the other man rips the knife from his hand to use as a weapon.

Jack slashes at Hannibal, and Hannibal feints, dodging the blade. Jack swings again, big and clumsy with the shock of the attack, and Hannibal ducks. He brings his arms up to defend himself, fists before his face, and blocks Jack’s next attack, striking at his elbow to make Jack drop the knife with a clatter. The *strength* of the larger Alpha surprises him, though, and Hannibal hears a gasping grunt escape him as bloodied fists pummel him. He manages to kick Jack’s gun away and it skids across the floor, lost beneath the refrigerator.

But Jack has him in a grip now, and Hannibal’s feet kick air as the other Alpha gets a shoulder up against to his chest, swinging him round in a full body tackle. There’s a moment of sickening freefall and then Hannibal’s shoulders smash into the glass of the cupboard above the sink. He collapses, letting his muscles relax to lessen the injuries, and Jack grabs him again.

Jack gets in two sharp jabs to Hannibal’s gut, sending bright pain scorching through his abdomen, and then Hannibal punches him, the shock reverberating up through his arm. Jack shoves him and Hannibal sprawls on his back over the island, scattering ingredients and utensils in his wake.

He grabs a saucepan, and whacks Jack over the head with it, but the momentum carries him forward and Jack recovers fast. Jack grabs Hannibal by the shoulders and swings him round again, ferocious in his rage. And Jack, baring bloody teeth in a snarl, *throws* him into the stainless steel door of the refrigerator hard enough to dent it.

Hannibal collapses, his lungs too small behind aching ribs, his legs weak from the assault.

Fuck… I can’t let Jack win…

He looks up, wary now. His eyes are bright red, the iris color lending itself to enhanced vision. He can see the particles of scent in the air, swarming like flies, and he wants to scatter them. Can see the throb of Jack's pulse in his throat and temple, and he wants to *sever* it.

Jack stalks towards him, and Hannibal gets his feet under him, braced for another flurry of blows. He takes them, getting in the odd hit between the battering. But the big hand over his throat, choking him and pinning him up against the cupboard, is a concern. Hannibal hears himself hiss, going beyond mere Alpha growls to something even more primal. He hits out at Jack, whacking his rigid hand into the bigger man's spleen, then his kidney, and Jack is forced to release him as he staggers. But he doesn't fully let go of Hannibal, and drags him around with him so that Hannibal's back is up against Jack's chest, caught in a headlock.

Hannibal slams Jack back against the cupboard but Jack holds on, and, with a yell, uses the forward momentum to pin Hannibal face-first over the counter. Hannibal scrabbles for a knife from the block, but Jack tears him away before he can gain purchase on a handle. Instead, Hannibal uses the swinging motion to wrench Jack off-balance, and then reaches behind him for the pepper grinder. It is a heavy thing, and he hits Jack in the temple with it as hard as he can. Two, three times, until Jack stumbles away, dazed and bleeding.

Outside, as the rain pours down, Alana Bloom approaches the front door, stumbling in worry at the unmistakable sound of a fight going on inside the house.

Am I too late?

Jack bends, and for a brief, shining moment, Hannibal's heart soars with the hope that he's won. It is dashed, however, when Jack scoops up the knife Hannibal had thrown into his hand, the blade slick with blood. Jack holds it in his left hand, his right still dripping from the gash. Hannibal grabs his apron and tightens it to simulate nunchaku, advancing before Jack has time to catch his breath.

He feints twice, dodging the fencing blows, and wraps the apron up around Jack's elbow. Knocks the knife away and delivers a sharp kick to Jack's stomach, sending him crashing to the ground. Bloody saliva dribbles from Jack's mouth and the sour odor of fear-sweat rises from him as he crawls towards the cupboard, reaching for the handle to haul himself to his feet.

Hannibal pounces, spotting an opportunity. He grabs the freezer door and yanks it open, smashing the steel right into Jack's face. Jack collapses onto his side, coughing in pain.

The victory is fleeting. Jack is a seasoned fighter, and an Alpha in full Rut is one of the most dangerous creatures on the planet. He rises to his feet again, veins standing proud beneath his sweaty skin. He undoes his tie and winds it around his hand, stemming the blood. Hannibal pulls two carving knives from his block and turns to face him.

I'm going to kill you, Jack.

Jack punches, moving like a professional kickboxer. He's had some training in this, but Hannibal is faster. He gets up underneath the swing and flips Jack around, pinning him on his back on the counter and then stabbing with the knife. Jack's eyes widen, and he reacts on

pure instinct, grabbing the first thing to hand to shield his face. And effective barrier; Hannibal sinks his knife through the bamboo chopping board, his muscles shaking as he tries to overcome Jack's strength and spear him through the eye.

And then Jack twists, and shoves Hannibal away with such force that he slips in the blood smeared across the floor.

No!

The yell of Alphas fighting and the breaking of furniture is enough to make Alana's legs numb with shock. She pushes her brolly away and fumbles for her cell phone, dialing 911 and then scrabbling to find her revolver in her purse.

'I'd like to report gunshots,' she says; a lie but one sure to bring the police that bit sooner.

As Alana rattles off Hannibal's address, Hannibal struggles to get up in the kitchen. Jack is already on him, though; he grabs him in another headlock, blowing hard like a bull elephant before he *roars* and flips him up and over his head, smashing him face first into the shattered remains of the glass salad bowl on the ground.

Hannibal, dizzy from the world tilting, glass embedded in his elbow and a tooth wobbling in his jaw, can't summon the strength to do anything to defend himself. Jack winds his fist in Hannibal's hair, jerking his head back just so that he can punch him across the face, splitting his cheek across the bone and sending the loose tooth spinning away to join the gun beneath the refrigerator.

Alana gulps back her terror and heads inside, her gun held high, forcing her lead-filled legs to take her towards the sounds of fighting in the kitchen.

Hannibal snarls, but his arms are too heavy to respond adequately, and he feels a shiver of cold panic when he feels the silk of Jack's tie loop around his neck to garrote him. He has only a second to bring one finger up, and pain shoots through his knuckle as he chokes and grunts, draped across Jack's back like a carcass with his feet dangling.

Jack roars again, straining with all his might to crush Hannibal's windpipe. He pulls down, as hard as he possibly can, until he feels the other man sag. Only when Hannibal's arm falls, limp, at his side, does he trust that he has done enough to make him lose consciousness.

When Jack lowers him, Hannibal remains still for a moment longer. Jack is panting hard, fetid breath blowing over his ear. The tie is still dangerously tight around his neck, and Hannibal moves his hand slowly, feeling for a suitably large piece of glass.

The moment his fingers close on one, he strikes, plunging the shard deep into Jack's neck.

Jack's scream is little more than a hoarse gasp. He stumbles backwards, Rut replaced by terror in an instant. Blood spurts from his neck, pouring over his fingers as he reaches for the wound. He makes a choked little sound as he falls into the pantry, seeking refuge, and Hannibal allows himself a smile.

That could almost have been considered a *whimper*.

But Jack isn't dead yet, which means he is still a threat. Hannibal collects his knives, working the cramp from his fingers. He takes a step back, gathers his strength, and then throws himself at the pantry door.

Ready or not, Jack, here I come.

In the pantry, Jack sinks to the floor. He's bleeding… the wound is bad and he's fast losing consciousness. If he passes out, he's dead.

Not like this… Not like this.

The door swings open again, enough to show him Hannibal striding away, ready to take another running leap at the door. He manages to kick it shut and braces it with his legs, just as the other Alpha bodily slams himself into the wood.

Alana slides open the dining room door, her brow slick with sweat, her heart deafening in her ears. The kitchen comes into view and she sees, to her horror, Hannibal *throwing himself* at the pantry door. He's covered in blood, his hair wild and veins standing up across his tanned skin. His eyes are bright red, his fangs fully extended and hands wrapped around two blood-slick knives.

He looks like a monster.

'Hannibal…' Her voice breaks and she gulps.

Inside the pantry, Jack winds his tie tight around his neck, trying anything to stem the flow and save his life.

Outside, in the kitchen, Hannibal slams himself against the door again, and Alana screams at him.

'HANNIBAL!' When the Alpha pauses and turns to look at her, she nearly drops the gun as her fingers go numb with fear. 'Where's Jack?' she whispers, eyes brimming over with tears.

Hannibal, his eyes gleaming with a mad light, leans forwards with a little grin, and whispers, conspiratorially,

'In the pantry.' He sighs, his voice thick from what is, probably, a broken nose. 'I was hoping you and I wouldn't have to say goodbye. Nothing seen… nor said.' He tilts his head, considering. 'You may have found that rude…'

As he takes a step forwards, Alana bares her teeth and lifts the gun higher.

'STOP!'

Hannibal pauses, still catching his breath, still eyeing her warily.

Alana's lip trembles and tears trickle down her cheeks.

‘I was so *blind*.’

Hannibal licks blood from his upper lip and shrugs.

‘In your defense,’ he reasons, ‘I worked very hard to blind you.’ He sighs again. ‘You can stay blind.’ He sniffs, his nose trickling. ‘You can hide from this. Walk away; I’ll make no plans to call on you, but if you stay, I *will* kill you.’

The ease with which he says it; threatens her life… It’s staggering, and Alana’s breath catches in her throat. She narrows her eyes, aiming with the gun, trying to remember the exact angle to aim for, the height and position of her hands on the gun… The weight of the metal in her hands is comforting…

She can do this. She has to do this.

Hannibal watches her internal struggle and his gaze softens.

‘Be blind, Alana,’ he begs. She has been a dear friend, after all. He is… fond of her. ‘Don’t be brave.’

Alana screws up her face, sobbing at the idea of killing her friend, her mentor, her lover. She pulls the trigger –

And it clicks.

Hannibal’s mouth thins and his eyes flash crimson again.

So be it.

Fresh panic grips Alana, and she pulls the trigger again, just in case it was a fluke, or the bullet got caught in the chamber.

Click.

Nothing.

Click.

‘I took your bullets,’ Hannibal explains, settling the knives into his grip. As Alana keeps clicking, she also begins to hyperventilate, panic taking over her senses. He strides forwards and, like a deer before a wolf, the Beta bolts for safety.

As she runs, wasting precious energy on skidding footsteps and taking great gasping breaths, Hannibal stalks after her. He sets the knives aside before ascending the stairs; he doesn’t need them if Alana runs to the master bedroom – the only room she knows.

Up the stairs, last door on the right… Switch the lock, seal it shut…

Alana’s brain fires off instructions, which her dazed body obeys. She disengages the clip on the gun, drops it to the floor and pulls a fresh magazine from her purse.

Thank God Will told me to always keep a spare clip on me, she thinks, taking fresh aim at the door.

Hannibal pauses at the top of the stairs and presses his weight against the floorboard. As it groans, Alana shoots.

The gunshot echoes throughout the room. Two holes smash through the wood of the door, small on her size, shattering splinters on the other.

'I found more bullets!' she yells, and she sees someone move on the other side of the door, just visible through the gaps.

She fires again, hoping to hit Hannibal. To wound him, if not kill him.

If I don't, he'll kill me. How can this be real? How can this be happening?

Someone moves inside the room. The shadows part, a footstep taps on the floor and Alana gasps, spinning around.

Her brain reels. No… No, it can't be…

A young girl steps forwards, emerging from the dressing room where she'd been waiting. Auburn hair, blue eyes, tear-stained cheeks… Her ponytail reveals a missing ear, cut clean at the side of her skull.

Alana lowers the gun, her world shrinking to the patter of rain against the large window behind her, the smell of gunpowder and her own salty fear.

'Abigail?' she whispers, watching as Abigail Hobbs comes closer, and closer.

The young Beta is crying, fat tears rolling down her blotchy cheeks. She's wearing a khaki jumper and dark jeans; hunting gear, just like before.

'I'm so sorry,' she gasps, and then, before Alana can ask why, Abigail shoves her with all her strength.

Alana stumbles backwards, her feet catching on the padded window bench. Her knees buckle and she flings her arms out, but it's too late.

Glass shatters beneath the weight of her back. The world tips. It's almost musical; the tinkling of shards breaking, the drumming of rain… The whoosh of her body as she falls and the crack of breaking bones as she makes impact on the hard path before the front door.

Alana's last thought, before all she knows is pain, is that she didn't have time to scream. She thought she would scream.

I thought Hannibal would be the one to kill me.

***

Is he too late?

Will jumps out of the yellow cab, wrapping his herringbone coat tight around him and jogging across the waterlogged street. In seconds, his hair is plastered to his scalp and rain trickles down his back, chilling him to the bone.

Then, as soon as he steps through the garden gate, hearing the cab drive off behind him, he realizes why the upper window looks so wrong, and why every instinct is screaming for him to turn around and run.

Alana… God, no… Alana…

The Beta is lying, surrounded by broken glass, on the path before him. She's still conscious, still breathing, but, as Will's brain snaps back to attention and propel his legs forwards, he quickly sees that she's badly hurt.

Blood pours from her nose and mouth. Her eyes are glazed, her breathing labored. Her arms and legs are splayed, the bones splintered inside her skin.

Alana…

Will drops to his knees beside her and wrenches off his coat. He drapes it over her, trying to protect her as Alan rapidly descends into shock. He opens his cell phone and calls for help, even as he checks her pulse and lifts her broken jaw to clear her airway.

'This is Will Graham,' he says, speaking over the voice of the operator. 'I need ERT at 5 Chandler Square.'

'J-Jack…' Alana manages, her brain clinging to one last vestige of consciousness. 'Jack is inside…'

Abigail, too… Abigail is… inside… Will… Will…

She tries to hold on, she tries to breathe, to get enough air to her oxygen starved brain but she's fading, she's falling again and the pain, the *pain*…

'*Go*,' she manages, wishing she could lose consciousness, wishing she could die so the pain would stop.

Will obeys her. He can't help her, but maybe he can still save Jack.

He fumbles to get his gun from the back of his belt, snaps the safety off, and hurries into the house.

***

So much blood… How much blood can a person lose before dying?

Gasping, trying not to dislodge the shard of glass in his carotid artery, Jack manages to get his phone from his jacket pocket.

Bella… I have to call Bella… I have to tell her… I'm sorry…

He never should have come here, tonight. He could have been at home with her right now, reading to her, watching over her, comforting her… Instead, he's alone in Hannibal's pantry, soaked through with blood, slipping in and out of consciousness, over a hundred miles from home.

He manages to dial, his fingers thick and useless, and the phone begins to ring.

Please… Please, baby… Please answer… I just wanna hear your voice, one last time.

***

The house reeks of blood and sweat. Will keeps his gun up, his heart hammering and shoulders aching from the tension running through him.

The dining room is empty. The herb garden stands abandoned.

We had so many good times in this room… So many exquisite meals… So many revelations.

Shattered glass covers the kitchen floor, speckled with blood. More blood seeps under the pantry door, and Will's heart skips a beat at how *much* there is.

Is Jack still alive? Am I too late?

It wasn't supposed to be like this. How did it all go so wrong?

He hears a footstep on the kitchen floor and turns, his gun up, ready to fire.

Abigail sobs, pale and wretched in her hunting gear. She stares at Will; her second father, her only remaining family, and she lets all of her pain show on her face.

I'm sorry.

Will's brain spins at the sight of her. She's… Abigail's… *alive…*

Hannibal didn't kill you.

He lowers his gun. His crest throbs, pulsing up against the silk lining of his collar. He can feel his insides churning, anxiety and relief and worry and disbelief swirling into an intoxicating mix until he feels sick with it.

Abigail whimpers, tears pouring from her bloodshot eyes, and Will aches to go to her, to wrap her in his arms and comfort her.

'Abigail…'

'I didn't know what else to do,' Abigail moans, hating herself for the hurt on Will's face, knowing she's the cause of it. 'So… I just did what he told me to do…'

What he told you to do…

If Abigail is here… Then that means…

No. No, no, please, no…

‘Where is he?’ Will asks, his shoulders slumping in defeat. Abigail’s blue eyes widen, fixing on something just past Will’s shoulder, and he’s *there.* Will can’t smell him, can’t hear him, but he *knows* he’s there. He can feel him. His rage, his *hurt*…

His face twists and tears well in his eyes. He starts to speak, his voice cracking, even as he turns around.

‘You… were supposed… to *leave*.’

Hannibal gazes at his beloved. Will is ashen, his hair near black with rainwater, skin pebbled with cold. His burgundy shirt clings to his body, revealing the softness of his stomach and the roundness of his chest.

We could have been so happy together.

‘We couldn’t leave without you,’ he replies, his voice rough with unshed tears.

Will stares up at his Alpha. He can feel how gold his eyes are. His heart aches at the grief on the other man’s face and all he wants to do is kiss him until the pain goes away. Hannibal looks older than his forty years; he’s lined with exhaustion and bloodied from the fight with Jack…

But, worse than anything, he is wounded from Will’s betrayal.

Hannibal sighs, grieving the anguish of his Omega’s expression. Will regrets his decision; regrets his betrayal. But time makes fools of them all, and the path has been laid. The cards have been dealt and now, the time has come to repay the debt.

My sweet, cruel mylimasis…

He cups the side of Will’s face, stroking his cheek. How he adores this face… How he has cherished his time with this beautiful body and mind.

The curved blade of the nuchalectomy knife flashes in the low light, and then Hannibal buries it in Will’s gut, right where his womb should be.

I trusted you. And you betrayed me.

He grips Will’s crest, paralyzing him as he cuts into the Omega’s body. As he cuts out all hope of their future together, just as surely as Will cut out that hope with his decision to lie to him.

No!

Will grunts, shock making him drop the gun. This… This isn’t real… Hannibal isn’t…

He grabs for his Alpha's arm. Blood spatters the floor, covering his boots, and then the pain hits. It twists inside him, a live, writhing serpent. His uterus cramps and he feels his balls shrink up against his body, even as wetness leaks from inside of him.

The baby… Hannibal, no… The baby!

Will falls forwards, his knees giving way, and Hannibal hugs him close in a parody of comfort.

And now…

The knife slides beneath the crest like butter. Skin parts from muscle, muscle from bone, nerve from sinew, and his own Alphan crest sears in agony at the mutilation. Hannibal grits his teeth, disregarding the physical pain, telling himself it is *nothing* compared to the emotional agony of Will's betrayal.

I loved you.

He strokes Will's hair, offering him small comfort as the Omega sobs against him, flayed alive, body and soul.

Will is shaking; he can feel blood spilling down his back, wetting his shirt more, and the ragged flap of skin left at the top of his neck makes him sick. He can't help but nuzzle Hannibal's shoulder, sucking up the smell of him, his body a mess of razor-pain and hot nausea.

The baby…

'Time did reverse,' Hannibal murmurs, hugging Will close as their bond collapses, the beautiful cherub-painted room of their memory palace fading forever. 'The teacup that I shattered did come together.'

The ambulance is coming… If they get here in time, they can save the baby…

Will clings to Hannibal, his mind stuck on that one, futile hope. He can't let go; he can't stop whimpering for his Alpha to save him. To save their child.

Please… Please, Hannibal, please…

'A place was made for Abigail in your world,' Hannibal continues, gazing beyond his Omega's embrace to their surrogate daughter, who stares in horror at the scene before her. 'Do you understand?'

I don't understand anything.

Will shakes his head, squeezing his eyes tight shut and hugging Hannibal with desperate abandon, silently screaming for him to stop, to please, *please* just make it *stop*.

I never wanted this.

‘A place was made for all of us,’ Hannibal advises, his voice breaking with emotion and the pain of his Alphan crest cracking and falling away in a bloody mess. ‘Together.’

We could have been so happy.

Hannibal pushes Will away, holding him up in a choking grip. Will’s eyes are bright gold, the sclera bloodshot and cheeks gray with shock and pain.

‘I wanted to surprise you,’ he explains, shaking his head at the stupid, selfish man before him. ‘And you…’ He glances down at the gun, disgusted. ‘You wanted to surprise me.’

Hannibal lets him go, and Will collapses to the floor. He has just enough control left to make sure he rolls as he lands, falling onto his elbow rather than his open belly, and he presses the flesh together in a vain effort to somehow protect the fetus inside.

This can’t be happening.

Abigail darts after him but a sharp look from Hannibal freezes her in her place and she watches, helpless, as Will props himself against the wall by the oven, pathetically holding his stomach where the baby is, surely, dying.

‘I let you know me!’ Hannibal snarls, glaring down at his former lover, hating how *wet* his eyes are. ‘*See* me.’ He wrenches the veil down, telling himself the Omega is no more important to him than dirt on his shoe, even as Will clutches his abdomen and whimpers for help.

‘I gave you a rare gift,’ the Alpha continues, his knuckles white around the wooden handle of the cutting knife, tears spilling, unnoticed, down his face. ‘But you didn’t want it.’

‘Didn’t I?’ Will whispers, staring up at the man to whom he’d given his heart. The man who had, so thoroughly, broken him, again.

‘You would deny me my life,’ Hannibal growls, but Will shakes his head, almost fainting at the pain in his neck.

‘No,’ he manages, gritting his teeth to keep from screaming. ‘Not your life, not –’

‘My freedom, then!’ Hannibal snaps. ‘You would take *that* from me.’ He turns away as Will gasps and shudders in another bout of pain, and speaks absently towards Abigail as he gives voice to the horror of the foolhardy plan that had, ultimately, failed. ‘Confine me to a prison cell.’

Abigail watches him, wary for her own safety, sad for him but hurting more for Will.

Hannibal looks back at Will, tilting his head, his eyes dead and dark like chips of black ice in his face.

‘Did you believe you could change me?’ he asks, considering the dying Omega before him. ‘The way I’ve changed you?’

‘I…’ Will manages to lift his head, ignoring the tears spilling from his eyes as he lifts his gaze to his mate’s cruel face. ‘I already did.’

More than you’ll ever know.

He manages the tiniest of smiles, sad and sorry, and then curls around his abdomen again, struggling to breathe through the agony.

Hannibal releases a long, slow breath, wondering at how they could have come so far and yet circled right back around to the beginning.

‘Fate and circumstance have returned us to this moment,’ he murmurs. ‘When the teacup shatters.’

You broke me.

Will remembers telling Hannibal about that; about how he felt after the heat manipulations and hormone injections. He glares up at the other man; pouring all of his anger and helplessness into the baring of his teeth.

Hannibal’s gaze softens, and the way he looks down, impassive, is terrifying.

‘I forgive you, Will.’ A pause. ‘Will you forgive me?’

Forgive you…?

It takes Will a second, just a second, and then he realizes.

‘Oh, don’t… *don’t*…’

Please… Please, Hannibal… Don’t…

He’s still begging, little mewls huffing on his labored breath even as the Alpha reaches for Abigail. The Beta looks at him, puzzled, and then goes to him; a good little lamb to the slaughter.

She knows; Will can see it in her face, but she doesn’t know what else to do… Maybe, somehow, she still trusts him not to hurt her too badly…

‘Abigail,’ Hannibal says, beckoning her closer. ‘Come to me.’

And Hannibal holds her before him, her back to his chest, just like Hobbs did in that kitchen last year. It’s happening all over again; he can’t save her. The child of his first Alpha, his pseudo-mate… Hannibal had saved her, for him, and now he’s taking it all away.

You’re nothing with me, Will.

‘No, no, no! Hannibal, no!’ he begs, but it’s no use.

The blade cuts deep, slicing across her throat and severing the artery. Abigail chokes, drowning in her own blood, even as more of it spurts across Will's face, blinding him.

She falls to her knees and then onto her back, gasping and holding her neck, her fingers stained red as the skin parts.

And then Hannibal crouches down beside Will as the Omega leans over in a desperate bid to stem the flow, looking tenderly into his face as he says,

'You can make it all go away. Put your head back… Close your eyes… Wade into the quiet of the stream.'

He considers him, one last time, and then he's gone, and Will is alone with a dying Beta girl and a dying fetus, and no one to help them. No one to save them.

The pain is overwhelming. He can't breathe with it. Can't think with it. He's fading, sinking into nothingness, with no one to stop the fall. No one to catch him, this time. Because Hannibal was the one who did it to him. Hannibal took it all away, because of a choice that he made.

The Ravenstag is dying. Will, having collapsed onto his front in a pitiful attempt to staunch the flow of blood from Abigail's neck, turns his face in the pool of blood and sees the stag, his beast, his ego… The creature lies on its side, its flanks heaving, feather and furs matted and stiff.

It pants, gasping for breath, each one shallower than the last until, as Will watches, his body heavy and mind filling with the soothing trickle of water from his favorite stream, it's over.

Will sinks, not warm, not cold, not *anything* anymore. His mind loosens, drifting away like a kite on a broken string, loosening its last grip on reality until he shatters into a thousand tiny pieces, like dust in the wind.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

***

All things come to an end. Hannibal knows this, as well as anyone. His time in Baltimore has come to an end. His time with Will Graham has come to an end.

As he steps outside, the Alpha lifts his face to the rain, allowing it to wash away the salt of his tears and the copper of his blood.

At his feet, Alana Bloom lies dying, but Hannibal doesn't hear her. Doesn't see her. He wipes a hand over his face, symbolically wiping the fight away, starting fresh with a new mask, and leaves behind the man he thought he loved.

The family he thought he had.

Perhaps, in another life. But not this one.

He collects the herringbone coat from Alana's body, wraps it snug about his body, and disappears into the night.

***

The 12.15pm flight from BWI Marshall Airport to Paris, with crossover at Toronto, Canada, has 36 seats in First Class.

An Omegan air hostess walks down the aisle, smiling pleasantly as she offers, in perfect French, the complimentary champagne, water and orange juice of the flight.

Hannibal smiles up at her from his seat, dressed in a perfectly pressed grey silk suit and blue shirt, and says, softly,

'Je voudrais du champagne, s'il vous plait.'

At the request, the hostess passes him a glass of champagne, making the same offer to the blonde haired Alphan woman beside him.

Dr Bedelia Du Maurier shakes her head, declining with a quiet,

'*Non, merci*.'

The hostess moves on, and the two Alphas exchange a small, brittle smile.

What fun we shall have together, Hannibal thinks, sipping the Moët and thinking of the world ahead of them. *Just you and I, and all of Europe.*

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